



Inuit and the Right to Vote

Case Study

Note: This case study was developed in collaboration with the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami to tell the story of federal voting rights for Inuit. It does not cover the larger story of Inuit rights, governance and law, or the voting rights of First Nations peoples and Métis.

× Background information for teachers

Inuit are a distinct Indigenous people who live primarily in northern Canada and around the circumpolar world. In Canada, they are one of three constitutionally recognized Indigenous peoples, along with First Nations and Métis.

The Inuit traditional homelands in Canada span Nunatsiavut (northern Labrador), Nunavik (northern Quebec), Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories). Together, this land is called Inuit Nunangat. It makes up nearly one third of Canada's land mass and 50 percent of its coastline. There are also Inuit populations in Alaska, Greenland and Russia.

For thousands of years, most Inuit lived in small, close-knit communities. They lived in traditional ways, drawing on the resources from the land and sea to sustain themselves. Inuit values are built on cooperation and respect, and decisions were usually made by consensus.

When Canada was founded in 1867, Inuit homelands were not part of the country. For that reason, Canada's Constitution made no reference to Inuit. No treaties had been negotiated with them, nor were Inuit mentioned in the *Indian Act*. This meant that when Canada's borders expanded to include the traditional territories where Inuit live, the relationship between Inuit and federal and provincial governments was undefined in many ways—including whether Inuit had the right to vote in federal elections.

In theory, Inuit gained the right to vote in federal elections when Canada expanded north and their homelands became part of Canada. In reality, Inuit continued to live and govern themselves in traditional ways. Interactions with the federal government were limited, and Inuit were not offered voting services.

In 1934, federal election laws were changed to specifically exclude Inuit from voting. The reason for this exclusion was the emerging view that Inuit were a federal responsibility, like First Nations peoples. Since First Nations peoples were denied voting rights, Inuit were also excluded from voting.

Over the next decade and after the Second World War, the federal government began to change its view of the North and of Inuit. There was a greater focus on the North for economic resources and Arctic sovereignty. Seeking to provide better services for Inuit and Northerners, the federal government created a network of service centres across the North and settled Inuit around them.

Inuit were given the right to vote at the federal level in 1950, when Parliament decided that Inuit were distinct from First Nations peoples. The parliamentary committee reviewing the changes to electoral law stated that Inuit should be given “the privilege of voting” since, unlike First Nations peoples, they were not exempt from paying taxes. So, Inuit gained voting rights a full decade before First Nations.

Through several federal elections in the 1950s, election services were provided to about half of the communities in the Arctic. There were many challenges for election officials in enumerating Inuit across vast distances with limited technology. Election material was brought in by ship, helicopter, snowmobile and even parachute. By 1962, all Arctic communities had access to voting services.

At the time, one electoral district (or riding) covered all of what is now the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. But in 1976, as part of the review of electoral boundaries that takes place every 10 years, this vast area was divided in two. This created a new federal riding in the Eastern Arctic with an Inuit majority population.

In the following federal election, for the first time, all three candidates in a federal riding were Inuit, and the first Inuit member of Parliament was elected.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Inuit became more politically active at the national and regional levels. A new organization, which has come to be known as the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, was created to advocate for self-governance and land claims.

Inuit land claims agreements have been signed in all four Inuit regions:

- the James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement in Nunavik in 1975
- the Inuvialuit Final Agreement in 1984
- the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement in 1993
- the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement in Nunatsiavut in 2005

Inuit living in these four land claims regions (Nunavik, the Inuvialuit Settlement Region, Nunavut and Nunatsiavut) have a form of Inuit democracy. They vote for representatives of their Inuit land claims organization who work with the federal, territorial or provincial governments to administer the terms of the land claims agreements, manage the land and resources and work to preserve and promote Inuit language and culture.

Along with this Inuit democracy in these regions, everyone who is a Canadian citizen aged 18 and over—whether they are Inuit or non-Inuit—has the right to vote in provincial/territorial and federal elections.

Why were Inuit granted the right to vote in 1950?

Parliament gave federal voting rights to Inuit in 1950 due to many converging factors.

Legal distinction

A Supreme Court decision confirmed that Inuit were distinct from First Nations peoples and were not subject to the *Indian Act* under the law.

Federal presence

More interactions between the federal government and Inuit led to a growing understanding of Inuit as a people distinct from First Nations peoples.

Strategic considerations

Cold War tensions between western democracies like Canada and communist countries like the Soviet Union made the North more interesting, strategically speaking, to Canada.

Changing attitudes

The idea of universal voting rights for all citizens became more widespread due to a growing awareness of human rights.

What is the situation now?

Inuit are active in Canada's democracy, whether they live in southern Canada or in Inuit Nunangat.

✘ Terminology

Consensus

General or widespread agreement. The Nunavut and Northwest Territories legislatures are consensus governments, which means the members do not represent political parties and they work together closely to pass legislation.

Inuit Nunangat

Inuit homelands. It covers the four regions of the Arctic defined by the Inuit land claims agreements: Nunatsiavut (in Labrador), Nunavik (in northern Quebec), Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (in the Northwest Territories). Inuit vote to elect representatives in their Inuit land claims organization as well as in federal, provincial or territorial, and municipal elections.