



# Japanese Canadians and the Right to Vote Case Study

**Note:** This lesson examines federal voting rights for Japanese Canadians. It does not cover the larger story of Japanese Canadians' experiences, such as the whole history of internment and redress.

## ✖ Background information for teachers

Japanese Canadians began immigrating to Canada during the last decades of the 19th century, settling primarily in communities along the coastal areas of British Columbia (BC). They found work in the resource industries, such as fishing, farming and logging, and operated small businesses in urban areas.

Japanese Canadians experienced various forms of discrimination and prejudice, based on race and economic factors, from sectors of the general public and from the BC provincial government. This discrimination intensified during the latter part of the 19th century, as Japanese Canadians entered the workforce in larger numbers and were seen to be taking jobs away from other Canadians. Anti-Asian sentiment, stoked by newspapers and BC politicians, resulted in the passing of laws that took away Japanese Canadians' right to vote provincially in 1895.

At that time, federal election officials relied on provincial voters lists. That meant when BC took away provincial voting rights from Japanese Canadians living in the province, they also lost the right to vote at the federal level. Three years later, in 1898, the federal government passed a law creating new administrative measures to address the voting list barrier for Japanese Canadians living in BC. They could vote in federal elections if they contacted the federal election official (returning officer) to add their names to the federal voters list. In theory, this new provision went some way to restoring federal voting rights for Japanese Canadians living in BC, but in practice the measure was not widely known or used. It also required Japanese Canadians to make a special effort to vote federally, a burden that was not imposed on other Canadian citizens.

Many Japanese Canadians struggled against this prejudicial treatment and advocated for their right to participate in the democratic process like other citizens. In 1900, Tomekichi Homma launched a legal suit to get on the provincial voters list in BC. In the end, the courts ruled that BC could determine provincial voting rights.

During the First World War, Japanese Canadians joined the military to fight for Canada. While in military service, they were able to vote in the 1917 federal election

under the *Military Voters Act*. However, after the war, voting rights reverted to pre-war times.

In 1920, the federal election law changed again. Provincial voting exclusions were upheld and provincial voting lists were to be used in federal elections without exception. Since most Japanese Canadians continued to live in BC, this meant that most Japanese Canadians were deprived of their federal voting rights. In 1936, a delegation of the Japanese Canadian Citizens' League travelled to Ottawa to speak before the House of Commons. The delegates, all Canadian-born professionals, spoke at length before a special committee. Some parliamentarians were sympathetic to their pleas, but others were opposed, especially some members from BC. Their request for voting rights was denied.

Discrimination against Canadians of Japanese origin intensified when the United States and Canada went to war with Japan following the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. Along Canada's west coast, the Japanese population came to be seen as a security threat. Many people in BC advocated for something to be done about the risk to national security posed by Japanese Canadians. Eventually responding to these calls, the federal government, under the *War Measures Act*, suspended civil and democratic rights and, in 1942, relocated all Japanese Canadians from the coast of BC.

The forced relocation of Japanese Canadians to areas outside of BC meant that they were no longer subject to the voting restrictions in BC; technically, they

gained the federal right to vote. However, Parliament closed this loophole before the 1944 federal election so that Japanese Canadians who had been removed from BC could not vote, no matter where they now lived.

Japanese Canadians gained the federal right to vote unconditionally, regardless of province of residence, in 1948.

After years of lobbying for recognition of their treatment, Japanese Canadians negotiated a redress agreement and received an official apology from the federal government in 1988.

### **Why were Japanese Canadians discriminated against and denied their democratic rights?**

#### **Racial prejudice**

There was widespread prejudice against Japanese Canadians because of their perceived foreignness and cultural differences from Canadians of European background. Racial prejudice affected all aspects of daily life. For example, Japanese Canadians were paid lower wages than white workers and were often refused entry into trade unions.

#### **Fear of Japanese militarism**

The brutal struggle with Japan during the Second World War and questions about Japanese Canadian loyalty had the effect of intensifying anti-Japanese sentiment across Canada, especially in BC.

## What changed?

### Human rights

The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* had an impact in Canada on notions of racial inequality and democratic and civil rights.

### Peace

The wartime fear of the Japanese faded after the war ended.

### Agency

Japanese Canadians continued to speak out to have their rights recognized.

## What is the situation now?

Japanese Canadians are able to participate fully in Canadian political life. The right to vote of all Canadian citizens is protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.