



Women's Right to Vote Case Study

✘ Background information for teachers

When Canada was formed in 1867, only men could vote in federal elections. Each province had different rules, but women were essentially excluded from the vote everywhere in the country. Change happened slowly for Canadian women. Women (and men) took action in many ways and faced opposition from men and women alike. Women's suffrage groups were first established in the 1870s in Toronto, led by activists such as Dr. Emily Stowe. Other groups soon formed and created alliances with international organizations, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union.

In the early 20th century, long-held ideas about women's role in public life began to shift. The greatest momentum for women's equality came from the Prairie region of Western Canada. Manitoba women were especially active, presenting numerous petitions to the legislature, lobbying politicians, partnering with others and presenting public lectures on equality. Their efforts saw success when Manitoba became the first province to grant some women the vote in 1916. Saskatchewan and Alberta followed a few months later. Within a year, women had also been added to provincial voters lists in BC and Ontario, but not in Quebec or the Maritimes.

In terms of voting rights for women in federal elections, there was a limited advance in 1917 during the First World War. Women serving in the military or who had a relative serving in the armed forces became the first women in Canada to have the opportunity to vote in a federal election. A year later, in 1918, Parliament passed a law removing the gender barrier to voting and gave many Canadian women the right to vote. This did not mean that all women had the right to vote, though. Exclusions remained—not on the basis of gender, but for other reasons, such as race.

The struggle for women's equality did not end in 1918, as many women continued to be denied the right to vote. Women in Quebec obtained the provincial vote in 1940, and First Nations women were excluded from the federal vote until 1960. Today, women are prominent in Canadian political life, yet they are still underrepresented in the House of Commons and face obstacles to full participation in the democratic process.

Why was there so much resistance to women getting the vote?

Assumed male superiority

Many religious and cultural beliefs held that women were subordinate to men.

Public versus private domains

There was a belief that men were better suited to public life and women were more suited to private or domestic life.

Role in society

Many thought that women occupied a special role that included household duties, child rearing, and being caregivers and supporters to men. This role was seen as inconsistent with politics.

Implied weakness

There was a belief that women would not contribute to political life. They were considered too weak, too easily led, not logical in their thinking and overly emotional.

Knowledge

Women were thought to lack the knowledge essential to casting an informed vote.

Family vote

It was assumed wives and daughters would vote the same way as their husbands and fathers and so provide an unfair advantage.

What changed?

Agency

Women wanted change: they organized, mobilized, coordinated their efforts and made their voices heard.

Political gain

Women made up approximately 50 percent of the population and represented untapped votes for political parties.

Effects of the First World War

During the First World War, women took on a number of jobs previously reserved to men. Women proved that their abilities had been underestimated. After the war, women also gained the right to vote in both the United Kingdom and the United States.

Equality

Ideas were changing about gender equality, fairness and the positive contribution of women to Canadian public life.

What is the situation now?

Women are active in Canadian political life. They are still underrepresented in the House of Commons and face obstacles to full participation in political life.