



# Youth and the Right to Vote

## Case Study

### ✘ Background information for teachers

In 1867, at Confederation, the minimum voting age for federal and provincial elections was set at 21. This had been the voting age in the British North American colonies before Confederation and was a standard voting age in democracies around the world.

The voting age of 21 for federal elections remained the case, with some exceptions for young people in the military, until 1970, when the voting age was lowered to 18.

Throughout these 100-plus years, relatively little attention was paid to the question of voting age. The main exception related to voting rights for those serving in the military. During the First World War, a special wartime elections law gave voting rights to everyone involved in the war effort, even if they were under 21. After the war, the voting age went back to 21 for everyone.

The Second World War had a more lasting effect on voting age. Starting in 1942 and for the next 50 years, military electors could vote even if they were younger than the official voting age.

It is worth reflecting on how many young people served the country during the Second World War. Some 700,000 people, more than half of all of Canada's military personnel, were under the age of 21. This national service by youth, many still in their teens, prompted some governments to change rules about voting age requirements, starting at the provincial level.

In 1944, Alberta lowered the provincial voting age to 19; in 1945, Saskatchewan offered the provincial vote to people age 18 and up. Other provinces followed suit, lowering their voting ages to 18 over several decades.

At the federal level, there was little interest in lowering the voting age below 21 until the late 1960s, when Canada and much of the world experienced a youth revolution. Young Canadians were becoming more socially aware, and many teens became politically active. Although there was no organized public campaign to lower the voting age, the idea became widely accepted. With little debate, Parliament lowered the voting age to 18 in 1970.

Interestingly, the exception that allowed individuals serving in the Canadian Armed Forces to vote at any age persisted. Since people could enlist in the military at 17, they could also vote at that age. It was not until the 1990s that this special status was eliminated.

In 1991, the Royal Commission on Electoral Reform and Party Financing studied the question of lowering the voting age to 16. Reasons to support a change included avoiding age discrimination under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and encouraging youth voting while young people were still in school and could take part in civic education.

Arguments against lowering the voting age included the fact that the legal age of majority is 18. Minors are treated differently than those 18 and over in many different spheres of Canadian life, including the criminal justice system. For those

under 18, parental consent is required for many important decisions, such as getting married or seeking certain medical treatments. The Commission carried out public opinion surveys on the matter and found that most Canadians, including teens, did not support lowering the voting age.

The Commission concluded that decisions on voting age involve a judgment by a society about when individuals reach maturity as citizens. It recommended that the voting age be set at 18 for all, including military electors. It also suggested that the question of voting age be reconsidered from time to time as society changes.

### Provincial Voting Age 1944–1992

Year	Province	The provincial voting age is lowered from:
1944	Alberta	21 to 19
1945	Saskatchewan	21 to 18
1952	British Columbia	21 to 19
1964	Québec	21 to 18
1967	Prince Edward Island	21 to 18
1969	Manitoba	21 to 18
1970	Alberta	19 to 18
1970	Newfoundland and Labrador	21 to 18
1970	Nova Scotia	21 to 19
1971	Ontario	21 to 18
1971	New Brunswick	21 to 18
1973	Nova Scotia	19 to 18
1992	British Columbia	19 to 18

## Why was the general voting age set at 21 for so long?

### Tradition

The age of 21 was the standard age of voting in many places around the world until the 1960s. Few people questioned it.

### Responsibility

Voting was viewed as a serious responsibility and privilege that individuals could exercise only once they were old enough and had a stake in the community.

### Political gain

During both the First and Second World Wars, conscription (compulsory military service) was a contentious issue in some federal elections. The governments of the day thought that people serving in the military would support the government's stance on the issue.

## What changed?

### Service

Military service by those under age 21 in both the First and Second World Wars showed that youth contributed to the country and had a stake in its future. Their service also showed young people's maturity, courage and loyalty.

### Baby boom generation

Youth became an increasingly significant group. The population of young people grew significantly after the Second World War, and more and more young Canadians entered the workforce and became a political force.

### Global change

Change was happening not only in Canada but around the world, as other countries also recognized that youth were ready to participate and so lowered their voting age.

### What is the situation now?

The topic of lowering the voting age to 16 comes up regularly in legislatures across Canada.