



Case Study 1: Women and the Vote

✘ Background information

The struggle for women to achieve their democratic rights and vote in provincial and federal elections took decades. Groups sprang up across the country to advocate for women's equality and their right to vote. The suffrage movement—the fight for women's voting rights—was especially motivated and organized on the Canadian Prairies, with Manitoba leading the way.

Manitoba women, like all women in Canada, were denied the vote after the province entered Confederation in 1870. Women's rights activism grew out of grassroots campaigns that spawned several suffrage groups and a number of dedicated leaders. The earliest women's rights organizations in the province were formed in Manitoba in the 1890s by women who had come from Iceland. Other groups supporting women's suffrage, such as the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, followed. They drew up petitions, and women lobbied Manitoba politicians to secure their support. Many people opposed these initiatives, but the movement towards suffrage had begun.

The momentum intensified when the Manitoba Political Equality League, founded in 1912, started its organized and highly creative campaign to press for women's rights. Led by notable women such as Nellie McClung, the League undertook a campaign to win the support of Manitobans and pressure the provincial government to grant women the right to vote. The members advanced their cause through alliances with other provincial groups, delivering educational lectures and organizing rallies and media promotions. They even held a satirical mock parliament. In 1915, the League collected over 40,000 names on a petition in favour of women getting the vote and delivered it to the premier and the Manitoba legislature.

The concerted actions of women (and men) across Manitoba had a major impact on the political and social climate of the province. In 1916, a bill was introduced by Premier Norris and passed by the legislature to offer some women in Manitoba the right to vote. (It did not apply to all women in the province, as they had to meet other eligibility criteria.)

Manitoba was the first jurisdiction in post-Confederation Canada to remove the gender barrier to voting. This was the first step in a decades-long journey to achieving voting rights for women throughout Canada.

Key Dates for the Removal of Gender Barriers in Provincial and Federal Elections

The list of dates beside outlines some key milestones in the journey to women's voting rights in Canada.

Voting history is complex: gender was only one of the factors that determined who was eligible to vote at the federal and provincial level. At different times and in different parts of the country, other factors included Indigenous status, race, property ownership, religion, occupation and more.

We use the word "many" beside as a reminder that not all women received the right to vote when gender barriers were removed. They were excluded by other eligibility criteria that applied to both women and men. In particular, First Nations women and men were not afforded the right to vote until 1960, unless they gave up their status.

- **1916:** Many women in Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta obtain the provincial vote.
- **1917:** Many women in British Columbia and Ontario obtain the provincial vote.
- **1917:** Women serving in the Canadian Armed Forces and women who are relatives of men in the military are able to vote in federal elections.
- **1918:** Many women across Canada obtain the federal vote.
- **1918:** Many Nova Scotia women obtain the provincial vote.
- **1919:** Many New Brunswick and Yukon women obtain the provincial or territorial vote.
- **1922:** Many Prince Edward Island women are able to vote in provincial elections.
- **1925:** Many women in Newfoundland and Labrador (which did not become part of Canada until 1949) are able to vote.
- **1940:** Many Quebec women obtain the provincial vote.
- **1950:** Inuit women (and men) obtain the right to vote.
- **1951:** Many women in the Northwest Territories obtain the right to vote at the territorial level.
- **1960:** First Nations women (and men) obtain the federal vote without conditions.
- **1982:** The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* guarantees all citizens the right to vote.

Please see another Elections Canada educational resource, *Voting Rights through Time*, for more information about inclusion, exclusion and voting rights at the federal level in Canada.

Visit electionsanddemocracy.ca.