

Comparing Electoral Systems: ✕ Canada and the United States



Introduction

Canada has a unique federal electoral system. While Canada and the United States (US) share similarities, their federal electoral systems are quite different.

Educators can use this activity to help students better understand Canada's system by comparing it to that of the US.

Level:

Secondary

Inquiry question:

How do Canada's federal elections compare to those of the US?

Getting ready

You will need:

- Federal Elections Comparison Table (one per student)
- Backgrounder with helpful vocabulary (one per student)

✕ Teacher instructions

Ask your students to reflect on what they already know, using the following prompts:

1. What are some similarities and differences between the US and Canada?
2. How do elections work in Canada and the US?
3. What questions do you have?

Ask the students to turn and talk with a partner to exchange ideas. Then invite some pairs to share their ideas and questions with the class.

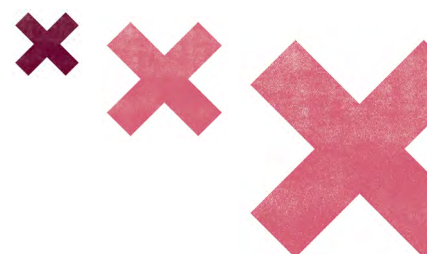
Distribute the Federal Elections Comparison Table and the Backgrounder.

Have students review the information. They may notice that while there are many similarities between Canadian and US federal elections, there are also many differences. They can note their observations using a graphic organizer, like a Venn diagram.

Once students have completed this activity, you can lead a class discussion, making connections to students' questions and observations from the beginning of the lesson.

Invite students to reflect on what they learned in an exit card, using one or more of the following prompts:

1. What are some key differences between Canada and the US?
2. What are some key similarities between Canada and the US?
3. What questions do you have about Canada's federal elections, now that you've compared them with those in the US?



Federal Elections ✕

Comparison Table



Comparable	Canada	US
Size of country	40.5 million people 9.98 million km2	335.9 million people 9.8 million km2
Type of country	Federation	Federation
Type of democracy	Representative democracy	Representative democracy
System of government	Constitutional monarchy	Federal republic
Head of State	His Majesty King Charles III (represented in Canada by the Governor General)	President
Head of government	Prime Minister	President
Federal representatives	Elected representatives to Parliament: 343 343 members of Parliament (MPs) elected to the House of Commons 105 senators, appointed on the advice of the Prime Minister	Elected representatives to Congress: 535 435 members of the House of Representatives (congressional representatives) 100 senators
Who can vote?	Canadian citizens who are at least 18 years old. The rules are the same across Canada.	Most US citizens who are at least 18 years old. Each state has its own rules. For example, some people with a felony conviction cannot vote.

Comparable	Canada	US
How do you get on the voters list?	You can register at any time to be on the National Register of Electors, including on election day. The rules are the same across Canada.	In most states, voters have to register before election day to be able to vote. The process differs from state to state.
How often do federal elections happen?	While Canada's fixed-date election law calls for a federal election to be held every four years, an election can be called sooner or later, as long as it is not more than five years from the previous election. This happens most commonly in a minority government situation.	All elections are on a fixed schedule: President and Vice-President: every four years Members of the House of Representatives: every two years Senators: every six years (every two years, one third of the Senate's seats are up for election).
What type of election system does the country have?	First-past-the-post. In this system, the candidate with the most votes is elected.	First-past-the-post. In this system, the candidate with the most votes is elected.
What does a ballot look like?	Same format across Canada. There is only one person to vote for: your local representative in Parliament. The ballot: • includes the names of the candidates in your riding and the party they belong to, if any • is in both official languages • is in alphabetical order	Different format in every state. There are several items to vote for, including candidates and laws. The ballot includes: • presidential and vice-presidential candidates • candidates for the House of Representatives • candidates for the Senate • candidates for the state legislature The ballot can include: • candidates running for local positions (judges, school board members, etc.) • referendums on laws or bills

Comparable	Canada	US
Who do you vote for?	Your local representative in Parliament (not for the Prime Minister).	• the President and Vice-President • your congressional representative • your senator • your state representatives • other
How does your vote count?	Citizens vote directly for the member of Parliament in their riding. The party with the most seats forms the Government and its leader becomes the Prime Minister.	Citizens vote indirectly for the President and Vice-President through the Electoral College. The officials of the Electoral College vote directly for the President and Vice-President. Citizens vote directly for local Congress and Senate candidates.
How many political parties can there be?	No limit to the number of parties. The current House of Commons has representatives from five parties and independents. Most senators are independent, but some are affiliated.	No limit to the number of parties. The House of Representatives is currently split between Democrat and Republican seats. The Senate is divided between Democrats and Republicans
Who organizes the federal election?	One organization, Elections Canada. This non-partisan, independent agency reports directly to Parliament. Elections Canada makes sure that elections are carried out the same way across the country.	Because elections are state-run, a different organization organizes the election in each state. This means that elections are run differently in every state and sometimes even at the local level. There are about 13,000 entities involved in organizing a US federal election.
What voting options are available?	Voting options are the same for all electors. They can vote on election day, at their advance poll, at a local Elections Canada office or by mail.	Voting options vary by state. For example, in some states all voters are sent a ballot to vote by mail. In others, you can vote by mail only if you request a ballot or if you have a valid reason.

Backgrounder ✕

Comparing Electoral Systems



Canada's government system and election system are quite different from those of the United States (US).

✕ Canada

In Canada, the role of the Head of State is mostly ceremonial, non-political and distinct from the role of the head of government. Our Head of State is the hereditary monarch, represented by the Governor General.

Canada's head of government—the person who leads the federal government and runs the business of the country—is the Prime Minister. The Prime Minister is chosen through an electoral process but is not elected directly. Generally, the Prime Minister is the leader of the party that wins the most seats in the House of Commons in a general election.

There are currently 343 seats in the House of Commons. Each member of Parliament is elected to represent one electoral district (also known as a “riding” or “constituency”). A federal election takes place in each of the country's ridings and is overseen and coordinated by Elections Canada, an independent, non-partisan agency. Provincial, territorial and local elections take place separately and are organized by their own independent election agencies.

✕ United States

In the US, the Head of State and head of government are one person: the President. Americans vote separately for their President, senators and congressional representatives. During a US election, voters have to choose officials for more than 500,000 positions at the federal, state and local levels. There is no national election system. Each of the 50 states runs the election with its own rules and processes.

A unique feature of the US system for choosing a President is the Electoral College. In this system, the presidential candidate who gets the most votes across the country does not automatically win the election. Instead, when voters cast their vote for the President, they are actually voting for a group of officials who will represent their state at the Electoral College. It is these officials who vote for the presidential candidate. The candidate with the most votes in the Electoral College wins the presidency.

Helpful Vocabulary

Constitutional monarchy:

A system in which the powers of the monarch are limited by the written or unwritten constitution of the country.

Electoral College:

In the US, the Electoral College is the group of 538 appointed members who represent the states and vote directly for the President. The presidential candidate with the most votes in a state during the general election gets all of the Electoral College votes for that state, except for two states.

Electoral district:

Also known as a “riding” or “constituency,” an electoral district is a geographical region whose residents elect one representative to the federal government.

Federal republic:

A country that is a federation where leaders are elected.

Federation:

A political entity which is made up of partially self-governing regions (e.g. states or provinces) under a central federal government.

Head of government:

The person that leads the government and runs the business of the country.

Head of State:

The chief public representative of a country who is seen as the embodiment of the state.

House of Commons:

Lower legislative branch of the Government in Canada. Most laws passed by Parliament begin in the House of Commons.

House of Representatives:

Lower legislative branch of the US Government, responsible for making federal laws.

Monarchy:

A form of government headed by a monarch (e.g. a king or queen).

Presidential ticket:

In the US, presidential candidates choose a vice-presidential candidate as a partner to campaign with. During the election, they are one unit that can be voted for. This combination is referred to as the “presidential ticket.”

Representative democracy:

Type of government that is led by elected individuals who represent large groups of people.

Republic:

A country in which supreme power is held by an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch.

Senate:

Second, upper legislative branch of government in the US and Canada.