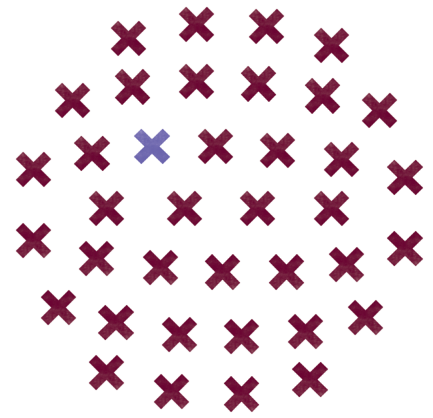


Voting Around the World series

Democracy



Canada's democracy is unique, but it also shares similarities with other democratic countries. Every democracy is a little different and is shaped by the shared histories and values of the country and the people who live there.

Democratic principles have long existed in the land we now call Canada. Indigenous Peoples across North America have governed themselves for thousands of years through democratic systems rooted in consensus, respect and collective responsibility.

Our democracy evolves as society changes and we encounter new challenges and opportunities. It is shaped by all of us as we decide how we should live together.

What is democracy?

Democracy is a system of government in which power is held by the people. They have a say in the laws, policies and leadership of the country. Citizens choose their leaders, often by voting in elections. They also have the right to share their opinions, ask questions and get involved in issues that matter to them.

In a democracy:

- People can vote for the leaders they want.
- There are rules to make sure that elections are free and fair.
- Everyone has the right to speak up and be heard.
- The media is free to report independently on events.

Kinds of democracy

Representative democracy

People elect representatives who make decisions and pass laws on their behalf.

Canada is a representative democracy, where voters choose members of Parliament (MPs) to represent their electoral district, or riding, in the House of Commons.

Parliamentary democracy

A type of representative democracy. The head of the government, normally a prime minister, has the support of the majority of elected officials.

Canada is a parliamentary democracy. Our Prime Minister is usually the leader of the party with the most seats in the House of Commons. He or she is also an elected member of Parliament who represents an electoral district.

Presidential democracy

A type of representative democracy. The head of government, the president, is elected separately from the legislature and holds significant executive power.

The United States is an example of a presidential democracy, where the president and members of Congress are elected separately.

Some places, like France and Portugal, have both a president and a prime minister who share executive power.

Direct democracy

People vote directly on specific issues or laws. Ancient Athens is an example of direct democracy. All adult male citizens were expected to vote on laws.

Canada has elements of direct democracy. For example, federal or provincial governments can call a referendum for citizens to vote on a specific issue.

Participatory democracy

People are involved directly in decision making. Many Indigenous governance systems include participatory elements, such as a Council of Elders.

In Canada there many ways that people can participate in our democracy—for example, by attending a town hall meeting, voting in a referendum or serving on a citizen's assembly.

× Indigenous governance

Indigenous governance systems in Canada have elements of many kinds of democracies. Here are a few examples:

- **The Haudenosaunee Confederacy** in Ontario makes decisions through consensus, which means talking things through until everyone agrees on a decision.
- **The Nisga'a Nation** in British Columbia has its own elected government that honours and uses traditional values in decision making. Their system includes both elected leaders and a Council of Elders who provide guidance.
- **The Tłıchǵ Government** in the Northwest Territories makes decisions about land use, education and culture through a representative assembly. An important part of this government is the Annual Gathering where Tłıchǵ citizens can participate directly in their democracy.
- **The Nunatsiavut Government** in Labrador was established in 2005 to manage resources and support Inuit living in Nunatsiavut. The legislature in Nain is set up in a circle to encourage discussion and consensus building.

× Other systems

Not every country follows a democratic model. Here are some other systems of government:

Monarchies

In a monarchy, a king, queen or royal family plays a central role in government. Some monarchies are symbolic, such as those in the United Kingdom and Sweden, and coexist with democratic institutions.

In Canada, we have a constitutional monarchy. This means that the king or queen is our head of state, but elected officials hold political power. The monarch's role is largely ceremonial, and the king or queen is represented by the Governor General of Canada.

Other monarchies are absolute, where the monarch has full governing authority, as in Saudi Arabia.

Authoritarian regimes

In an authoritarian regime, a single leader or party holds power and makes almost all decisions. Elections may be limited or not held at all. Power is maintained through a strong military, usually controlled closely by the government. Examples: China, North Korea.

Theocracies

A theocratic government is based on religious principles. Religious leaders or laws guide decision making. Examples: Vatican City, Iran.

Hybrid regimes

Some countries combine elements of democracy with limited political competition. Elections may be held, but some aspects of political participation or media independence may be restricted. There are several organizations that publish an annual democracy index. Some examples of hybrid regimes identified by these organizations include Russia, Turkey and Venezuela.

✕ Canada's electoral system

Canada is governed by Parliament, where elected representatives make decisions and laws.

At the federal level, Canada uses a voting system called “single-member plurality.” This is more commonly known as “first past the post.” Here’s how it works:

- The country is divided into areas called electoral districts, or ridings. Each district is represented by a single member of Parliament (MP).
- Electors vote for their preferred candidate in their electoral district.
- The candidate with the most votes in an electoral district wins a seat in the House of Commons, becoming the MP for that riding.
- The party that wins the most seats typically forms government.
- Federal elections are run by Elections Canada, an independent, non-partisan agency.

Why democracy and civic participation matter

Around the world, people continue to advocate for the right to vote, the right to express their views and the right to take part in collective decisions. Democracy works best when citizens understand how it functions and actively participate in shaping it.

Democracies face ongoing challenges, like low voter turnout, misinformation and political division. Every country meets these challenges in different ways. A democracy is not static—it is built by the people and continuously evolves. It depends on the informed participation of all citizens to stay strong and healthy.

We don’t just inherit democracy, we shape it! Every time we vote, speak up or support others to get involved, we contribute to the health of our democracy.

Democracies across the world are complex and ever-changing. This article is an introduction for students to Canada's electoral system in a global context. The information presented may not reflect all the nuances of a country's system of government, or its recent changes.