

VOTING RIGHTS

Educational Resource

May 2020

What Gives You the Right to Vote?

In 1905, when Alberta became a province, not all Canadians could vote. Primarily white adult men could vote and even that was a recent development. Today, all adult citizens are eligible to vote as guaranteed by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and we as a society acknowledge that everyone has a right to participate in our democratic system.

What's Happening at the Legislature in May?

Following the most recent update by Alberta's chief medical officer of health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, a number of precautionary measures are being implemented. All tours and public events are suspended and general public access to the Legislature Building and Edmonton Federal Building (which houses the Visitor Centre) is restricted. Please visit [the Assembly website](#) for updates.



Alberta Legislature

In This Issue

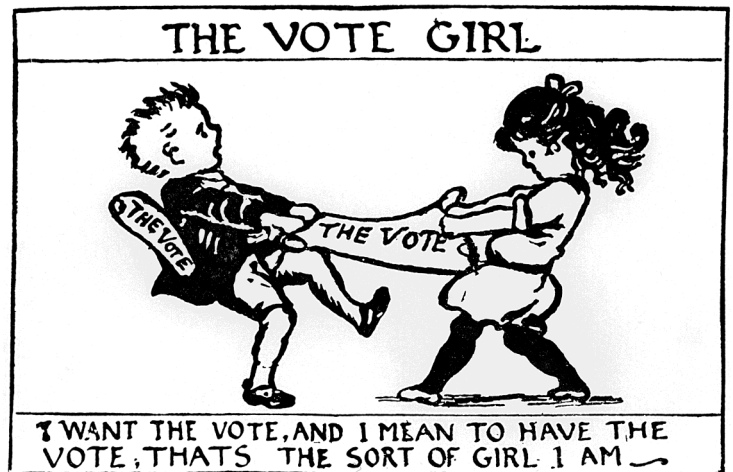
- Who fought for the right to vote?
- Resource links and videos
- Classroom Activities
- Learning Outcomes

Women

Albertans were leaders in the fight for women's right to vote. This movement gained strength in the early 20th century when people argued that women's contributions in settling the West, managing the home and serving during the First World War had earned them the right to vote.

On April 19, 1916 Alberta women achieved the right to vote and run for office in provincial elections.

A Federal equivalent of this right was granted in 1918 but, in both cases, not all Canadian women gained the right. Asian and Aboriginal women would have to wait much longer, in some cases as late as 1965!



A 1914 political cartoon from the "Grain Growers Guide." (Courtesy of Glenbow Archives NA-3818-14)

Aboriginal Peoples

Aboriginal peoples in Canada consist of three main groups – First Nations, Inuit and Métis – each of whom had different experiences obtaining the right to vote in provincial and federal elections.

First Nations men were eligible to vote in most parts of Canada from the time of Confederation, but only if they renounced their 'Indian Status.' First Nations peoples had formed their own political organizations long before Europeans arrived in North America, and many chose not to participate in, and assimilate to, 'Canadian' political culture. For these and other reasons, there was not a strong push for First Nations' right to vote. The Canadian government finally agreed to extend the right unconditionally in 1960, and Alberta passed its own legislation in 1965.

The Inuit were mostly ignored by the Canadian government until after the Second World War, when anxieties over Arctic sovereignty may have prompted the government to grant them the right to vote in 1950.

Métis men were not covered by the Indian Act or most treaties that affected Aboriginal groups, and thus always had the right to vote.



In Hiawatha Council Hall on occasion of federal by-election. Oct. 31, 1960: First votes cast since the right to vote was extended to all aboriginal adults were those of the Rice Lake Band near Peterborough, Ont. (Courtesy of Nick Nickels/Library and Archives Canada/PA-123915)

Wartime Exclusions

During the First World War, the Wartime Elections Act of 1917 removed the right to vote in federal elections from people who came to Canada from or spoke the languages of enemy countries such as Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire. Thousands were interned in camps across Canada and a smaller number again during the Second World War. Many had immigrated to Canada to escape persecution only to find it here again.

Religious groups including Mennonites, Hutterites and Doukhobours – who had settled in large numbers in western Canada – were also affected by the Act because they objected to military service. Tens of thousands of people from these communities living in the prairie provinces at this time had their right to vote taken away.



Typical Doukhobor costumes, except for the bare feet. The Doukhobours were one of the religious groups who were denied the right to vote in Canada. *(Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada / C-008887)*

By 1969 there were no more restrictions based on race, gender, or religion in the federal, provincial, and territorial voting systems of Canada.

Asian Canadians

Asian Canadians were denied the right to vote for many years and were the target of a number of discriminatory laws.

Chinese Canadians were the victims of head tax legislation aimed at restricting their immigration to Canada during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were also denied the vote despite having helped build the transcontinental railway and enlisting to fight for Canada in both world wars.

During the Second World War, Parliament passed legislation that required all Japanese Canadians to register and carry ID cards. They were then forcibly relocated away from the Pacific Coast to internment camps in the British Columbian interior and in Alberta, where they were denied the vote among other rights.

Minors

At the age of 16, young Albertans can pay taxes, drive a car, join the army reserves, consent to sex and even be charged with adult crimes – but they cannot vote. In 2001, Eryn Fitzgerald and Christine Jairamsingh from Edmonton, 15 and 16 years old, sued the Alberta government for the right to vote. They argued that the voting-age limit violated their democratic rights.

Fitzgerald and Jairamsingh lost their case, but others are still fighting for this right and argue that lowering the voting age will help engage young people in the democratic process and force politicians to pay more attention to issues regarding youth.

STUDENT VOTE



Student Vote offers numerous resources to help engage young people in the democratic process. (Courtesy of CIVIX)



Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin (Courtesy of Gerásio Baptista, Agência Brasil via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

Prisoners

Until very recently, most inmates in Canadian prisons were not allowed to vote. They were denied this right because they were not considered ‘decent and responsible citizens’ – an argument that had been used in the past to deny the vote to women, Aboriginal peoples and certain ethnic groups.

Following several challenges by prisoners in the 1990s, the issue was referred to the Supreme Court. In 2002 Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin, writing for the majority, held that denying the right to vote to federal inmates violated section 3 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and could not be justified. The Chief Justice observed that, “The right to vote, which lies at the heart of Canadian democracy, can only be trammelled for good reason. Here, the reasons offered do not suffice.”

In 2010, the Legislative Assembly of Alberta passed Bill 7, the Election Statutes Amendment Act, which extended the right to vote to all prisoners.



1914 suffrage rally re-enactment at the Alberta Legislature

Resource Links

[Citizen's Guide](#)

[Ask an Expert](#)

[Mock Legislature Resources](#)

[Student Vote](#)

[Elections Alberta](#)

[Elections Canada](#)

[Charter Facts](#)

[Building Future Voters](#)

[A History of the Vote in Canada](#)

Resource Videos

[Speaker's Corner](#)

[CIVIX - Democratic Principles](#)

[CIVIX - Why Voting Matters](#)

[Historica Canada - Heritage Minutes: Nellie McClung](#)

[Student Vote - The Right to Vote](#)

Activities

These two suggested activities ask students to reflect on voting rights from historical, personal, and community perspectives. Refer to the resource links and videos for more activities and background information.

Research the History

Have each student pick a group that fought for the right to vote in Canada or in Alberta, and research with the following guiding questions:

- Why were they not allowed to vote?
- What were the important events that happened during their fight to vote?
- What methods did they use to try to gain this right, and what impact did they have?

Have students present their research and share it with their classmates through whatever media they choose (a visual timeline, a video, PowerPoint, etc.).

Consider

Imagine that the Legislative Assembly of Alberta is considering lowering the voting age. Have students reflect on their own opinion with the following questions:

- Should the voting age in our province be lowered? Why or why not?
- If you think it should be changed, which voting age would be most appropriate and why?

Have students write up their thoughts as a letter to their MLA.

Learning Outcomes

Students will:

- Understand how a knowledge of the history of Alberta, of Canada and of the world, contributes to a better comprehension of contemporary realities (Social Studies, Knowledge and Understanding)
- Recognize and respect the democratic rights of all citizens in Canada (Social Studies, 6.1.1)
- Use historical and community resources to understand and organize the sequence of historical events (Social Studies, 6.S.2)
- Communicate effectively through appropriate forms, such as speeches, reports and multimedia presentations, applying information technologies that serve particular audiences and purposes (Social Studies, 6.S.8)
- Assess, critically, the impact of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms on the legislative process in Canada by exploring and reflecting upon the following questions and issues: How does the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms support individuals in exercising their rights? (Social Studies, 9.1.6)
- Listen, speak, read, write, view and represent to explore thoughts, ideas, feelings and experiences. (English Language Arts, General Outcome 1)

Alberta Education Program of Studies

Contact Us

Please let us know if you enjoyed this resource and found it helpful, and if there are any other topics you would like to see covered.

Also, if you tried any of the suggested activities, we would love to see pictures or examples of your students' work!

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Unless indicated otherwise, the included information has been taken directly from the Legislative Assembly Office's *The Citizen's Guide to the Alberta Legislature* (9th edition, 2016) or from the Legislative Assembly Office's Agora Interpretive Centre.

