

CONSIDERING A LOWER VOTING AGE

Struggles for the right to vote are as old as democracy itself. When the western concept of democracy emerged in Athens around 2500 years ago, only a handful of adult male citizens could vote. It was not until the 19th and 20th centuries that the right to vote was substantially liberalised.

Movements to grant women the right to vote were on the forefront of expanding voting rights. New Zealand was the first modern-day country to grant this right in 1893. Saskatchewan women gained this right in 1916. Then-premier Walter Scott's wife, Jesse Florence Read, signed a petition in support of women's suffrage in 1909. Scott was on side with his spouse, and encouraged women to gather support around the province to pave a path for the right to vote.

Women were one of several groups in society who gained voting rights in the 20th century. In Canada's early years, legislation specifically allowed for the discrimination against minority voting rights. This meant the federal government could arbitrarily say who could and who couldn't vote. For example, Doukhobors could not vote until 1945. Chinese and Indo-Canadians did not receive this right until 1947. Japanese Canadians were given the right to vote in 1948. It wasn't until 1960 that Indigenous Canadians no longer had to give up their Treaty rights and renounce their status under the *Indian Act* in order to vote in a federal election.

The provincial government granted voting rights to Indigenous people that same year.

Further voting rights were gained in 1988, when the right to vote was granted for those in mental health care facilities. In 2002, the Supreme Court ruled that prisoners have the right to vote.

For young people, expanding the right to vote has also been a point of contention. It was not until 1970, following the lead of the United Kingdom, that the Canadian voting age was reduced from 21 to 18.

More recently, the idea of lowering the voting age to 16 has been floated but has gained little traction. A private member's bill was put forth in the House of Commons in 2005 to have the federal voting age lowered, but it did not pass. In 2008 the concept was proposed in Nova Scotia but went nowhere. In 2023, the Ontario Superior Court rejected a Charter challenge by a group seeking to have the voting age lowered to 16. And in 2024, the Chief Electoral Officer of the Northwest Territories has said that the voting age should be lowered but there has yet to be any action taken towards this.

Arguments for a younger voting age include:

- teaching civics in conjunction with enabling voting would ingrain a sense of duty and habit in voting
- if younger people began to vote, politicians would be more inclined to address their needs
- young people already have many other adult rights such as driving

Arguments against a younger voting age include:

- young people lack the adult maturity to make a decision about governance
- voter turnout amongst young people is low, so granting them the vote would accomplish little

A few places around the world have voting ages lower than 18. For example, Austria, Brazil, and Cuba all have minimum voting ages of 16. Scotland and Wales allow 16-year-olds to vote in Scottish and Welsh Parliament elections, as well as local council elections. East Timor and Sudan have provisions to allow 17-year-olds to vote. As well, the newly-elected government in the United Kingdom has promised to lower the voting age to 16.



Discuss

1. Almost all young people learn about voting and elections throughout their time in school. However, they do not get the chance to vote until years later.
 - a) Will this time-lapse between learning and actually voting make you less likely to vote as an adult?
 - b) Are young people mature enough and ready to vote?
2. People under 18 have some but not all responsibilities of adults. Many laws acknowledge this. For example, the *Youth Criminal Justice Act* generally deals with young people differently than adults. As well, Saskatchewan's alcohol laws deal with people under 19 differently than adults.
 - a) Would lowering the voting age strengthen arguments for changing other youth-related laws? Why or why not?
 - b) If liquor or criminal laws were changed due to a recognition of the maturity of young people, would those changes necessarily be in your best interests?
3. What would be the broader consequences of young people voting?

