

A lot has changed in our elections. And a lot still happens before voting day.



THE ELECTION TRAIL

Illustrations by Rhael McGregor

Keeping Track



Early on, local officials made lists of who could vote. In 1885, the job was turned over to the party in power. Naturally, its workers ensured everyone who supported their party was on the list. (Allowed to vote: Well-off men over 21. Not allowed: Women, people of Asian heritage, Indigenous people.) Those in charge sometimes added fake names and changed others to prevent opponents from voting. Lists were rarely updated. The first national list of people eligible to vote was created in 1917. In 1930, government workers started going door to door to take names of electors, a process called **enumeration**. The last one, in 1997, was used to create the electronic **National Register of Electors**.

In 2019, Elections Canada started a list of 14- to 17-year-olds to be added to the national register when they turn 18.

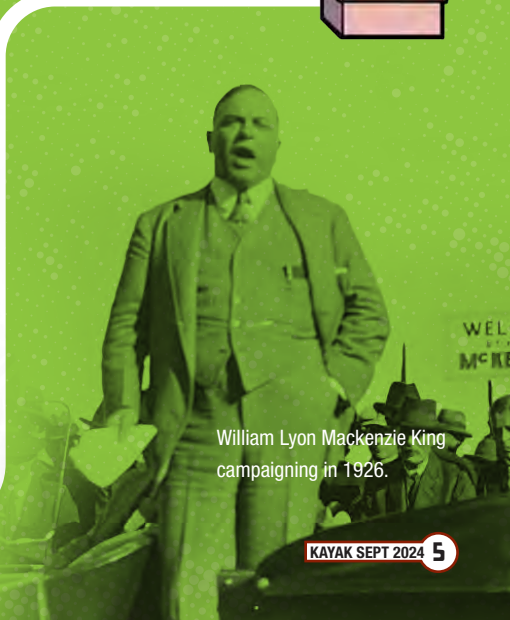
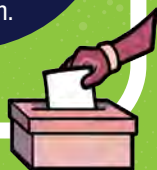




Kicking Off

If more than half of the members in the House of Commons belong to the party in power, it's a **majority** government. It can call an election any time it wants. If it has fewer members than the other parties put together, it's a **minority** government. The other parties can get together and vote against the government — on a major bill, not something small. The defeated Prime Minister asks the Governor General to **dissolve** (end) Parliament. The Chief Electoral Officer sends out special documents called the **writs** — instructions to election officials in every riding to hold an election.

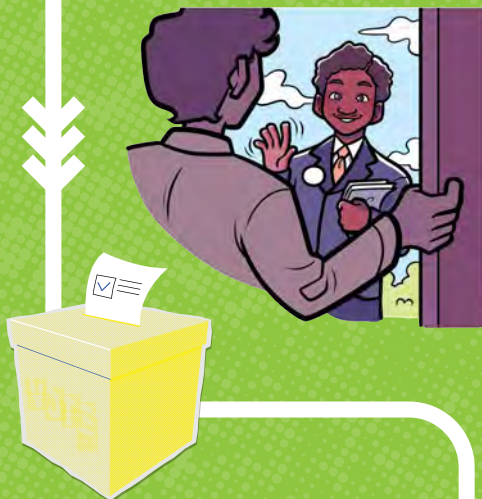
In 1926, Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King's minority Liberal government was defeated in the House of Commons less than a year after the last election. Governor General Julian Byng caused an uproar when he refused King's request to dissolve Parliament. Byng let the Conservatives form the government. No Governor General since then has turned down a Prime Minister who wants to call an election.



William Lyon Mackenzie King campaigning in 1926.



As of 2007, a federal election is to be held on the third Monday of October in the fourth year after the last one. Governments may call an election earlier if they think they're likely to win.



EVERY MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT, INCLUDING THE PRIME MINISTER, HAS TO RUN AS A CANDIDATE.

Canada is divided into geographic areas called **ridings**, each of which elects one Member of Parliament. The number of ridings is reviewed every 10 years. In the next election the number of ridings will increase from 338 to 343.

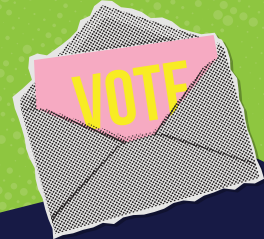


Starting in 1874, candidates used to have to pay money — a deposit — to prove they were serious. The deposit rose to \$1,000 before a judge ruled in 2017 that it was unfair.

A person who wants to be a candidate has to collect 100 signatures (50 in some areas) from voters in their riding.



Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister from 1984 to 1993.



Longest election
campaign:
89 days (1872)

Shortest election
campaign:
20 days (1874)

Canada has many political **parties** — organized groups of people who share ideas about how to run the country. Parties have been around for centuries, but only since 1970 have candidates' parties appeared beside their names on a ballot. The biggest are the Bloc Québécois, the Greens, the Liberals, the Conservatives and the New Democrats. They each choose a person to be their **candidate** in some or all of the country's ridings. A person could also run as an independent, without a party connection.



Winning
Over Voters



The time after a government is dissolved and before a new one takes power is called the **campaign**. It lasts 36 to 50 days. Candidates try to persuade people in their riding to vote for them. They speak at public meetings, do interviews and go “door-knocking” — dropping by people’s homes to introduce themselves and their party’s **platform**. That’s a collection of the things the party promises to do if it wins the election.



At first, candidates could spend as much as they wanted on whatever they wanted while trying to get elected. In 1874, new rules meant they had to say how much they spent and on what but didn't limit that spending. For years, there also weren't any limits on how much companies and individual people could donate to a candidate or party for an election. Starting in 1920, candidates had to say who gave them money and how much. The 1974 *Election Expenses Act* set out a lot more rules about spending and donations.

Since the 1968 election, leaders of the biggest parties have taken part in debates in French and English on national television during the campaign.



CANDIDATES ARE SAID TO "RUN" IN AN ELECTION, OR TO BE "RUNNING FOR OFFICE." IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH HOW FAST THEY MOVE!

Voting Early

Until 1920, voters were out of luck if they had to be away on election day. That year, new rules allowed specific groups to vote early: travelling salespeople, railway workers and sailors. Today, anyone can vote during six days of **advance polls** that end a week before election day. Since 1993, qualified voters who live in Canada or overseas can vote by mail. This is known as a **special ballot**. They have to return their ballot before voting day. Once they are registered to vote this way, they can't vote in person.



A **BALLOT** is a card printed with the names of all the candidates in the riding and their parties. Voters mark the circle beside the person they support.

TO VOTE IN A FEDERAL ELECTION, YOU MUST BE:

- ✓ 18 OR OLDER
- ✓ A CANADIAN CITIZEN

Election Day



A polling station (or polling place or just poll) is where people go to vote, or cast a ballot.



Early on, federal votes could take several days. Sometimes members of the party in power set it up so the first voting days were in ridings they knew they could win. Victories there meant later votes were more likely to go their way. In modern elections, voters have to bring identification to prove who they are. A line is drawn through their names on the voters list. They mark their ballot in private and put it in a box without anyone else seeing their choice. Candidates are allowed to have a representative called a **scrutineer** watch as election workers count the ballots.



Most people put an X in the circle beside the candidate they're voting for. But sometimes there are other scribbles instead. Election officials have to figure out whether the mark is clear enough to count as a vote for one candidate. If not, they can't count it. The same goes if the voter marks it in any way that could identify them.



Canada stretches across six time zones. Starting in 1997, voting hours have been set up to be as similar as possible across the country, but results from eastern Canada are already available while people in B.C. are still voting. It used to be illegal to reveal results until all polling stations were closed. That law was removed in 2014 because there was no way to stop the news from spreading.

SOME VOTERS MIGHT CHOOSE TO SPOIL THEIR BALLOT AS A PROTEST. THAT MEANS WRITING SOMETHING ON IT OR MARKING IT UP SO IT CAN'T BE COUNTED. ELECTION WORKERS NOTE THE TOTAL NUMBER OF SPOILED BALLOTS.





Winner


In each riding, election workers announce (unofficially) which candidate won the most votes. (Elections Canada usually confirms the count within a few days.) That person wins a **seat** in the House of Commons, becoming a Member of Parliament (MP) to represent their riding. We don't vote directly for the Prime Minister. The leader of the party that wins the most seats usually becomes Prime Minister. Our electoral system is known as **first past the post** — think of a race, where the winner is the first person to pass a marker.

IF AN MP QUILTS OR DIES, THE GOVERNMENT CALLS A **BYELECTION** (UNLESS IT'S TOO CLOSE TO THE NEXT ELECTION). **BYELECTIONS** WORK LIKE REGULAR ELECTIONS, BUT ONLY HAPPEN IN RIDINGS WHERE A SEAT NEEDS TO BE FILLED.

If you put all the votes together into something known as the **popular vote**, it's possible for a party to win the most votes, but not win the most seats.



Fresh Start



The Governor General invites the party that won the most seats to form the government, and its leader to take over as Prime Minister. Within a few weeks, Canada's new government takes its place.