

Canada Votes

FACTS ABOUT YOUR FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

TORONTO STAR

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Facts About Your Federal Government



Canada is a Constitutional Monarchy. The head of our country is a monarch. Today that is Queen Elizabeth II. We have a federal government which is made up of the monarch, a Governor-General who acts in his or her place, and Parliament, which is made up of the House of Commons and the Senate.

Before 1867, Canada was a British colony. Now, it is an independent country. However, the Queen of England is also still our head of state. That is why her face is on many coins, bills and stamps.

Many former British colonies joined together to form the British Commonwealth, a group of countries which work together to help each other. Canada is one of those former colonies. Most Commonwealth countries also still have Britain's Queen as their constitutional monarch.

Canada has a constitution. That is the rule book by which the country is run. The first set of rules was the British North America Act of 1867. It created a federal state based on the British system of government. This document has been amended many times. The newest amendment is the Constitution Act of 1982.

Not all rules are written into the constitution. Some are unwritten traditions. It is tradition for the government to resign if it loses a vote on a major issue, usually a spending bill. The BNA Act and the constitution also give a great deal of power to the Governor General, but in practise, those powers are not used.

Canada's Constitution divides the responsibility for running the country between the federal government and provincial governments. The federal government is responsible for areas important to the entire country. These include defence, international affairs and immigration. Other more local responsibilities are provincial. Those include natural resource management, educational and healthcare.

Constitutionally, both levels of government are independent. However, the federal government is supreme, and through the monarch and the governor-general, may disallow laws put forward by the provinces. In practise, this rarely happens.

The original division of powers between the federal and provincial governments was made more than 150 years ago. The writers of the constitution knew that times change. They decided that all areas of responsibility they had not thought of would go to the federal government. So today, the federal government is also responsible for regulating the internet and telephone companies, airlines and airports, and many other areas. In some cases, the federal government and provinces have reached agreements to share in those new responsibilities.



The House Of Commons



The House of Commons is Canada's elected assembly. Canadians vote in local voting districts called ridings for members of the House of Commons to represent them. Canada has 338 electoral districts or ridings today, but that number of ridings changes as the population grows.

The government must call general elections at least every five years. However, the government in power can call an election at any time. Traditionally, governments must resign and call elections if the House of Commons defeats an important piece of government legislation. This is not required by the Constitution. This is an example of an unwritten rule, a tradition.

Today, new legislation has given Canadians a fixed election date. Federal elections must now take place every four years, on the third Monday of October. The next federal election will be in October, 2019.

All citizens 18 years or older may vote and run for election to the House of Commons. Most candidates run in the name of a political party. They may also run as independents, without being part of a political party.

Prior to an election, the various parties hold nomination meetings in each riding. These meetings choose who will be candidate in that riding for their party. If more than one person wants to represent that riding, the party members vote to decide the issue. The winner then becomes the candidate for that party in that riding and runs against the other candidates in that riding. The party leader must approve all candidates running for their party, and may also appoint candidates to run in a particular riding.

The candidate who gets the most votes wins the election and becomes a member of parliament [MP] for that riding.

In parliament, MPs vote on legislation or changes to existing federal laws. MPs also speak for the constituency in the affairs of government.

Canadians do not elect their prime ministers. The party with the most seats in the House of Commons usually forms the government, and the leader of that party becomes Prime Minister of Canada. Members of political parties elect their leaders. Those leaders of political parties run in individual ridings like any other candidate.

The leader of the party with the next highest number of MPs becomes leader of the opposition.



The House Of Commons



If one party has more than half the seats in parliament, it forms what is called a majority government. Because that government controls a majority of seats in the House of Commons, it rarely loses a vote.

If the leading party has fewer than half the seats, it is known as a minority government. It depends on the support of one of the other parties in the House. That allows the other parties to pressure the government to support some ideas that the smaller parties prefer. The other parties also can work together to defeat any bill the government tries to pass that they don't like. The smaller parties have the power to force elections by voting down legislation.

The Prime Minister chooses advisors, and appoints cabinet ministers. They are usually members in the House of Commons from the prime minister's party. This group helps decide government policies. Cabinet ministers are given specific areas of responsibilities, such as the Department of External Affairs or the Defence Department. Cabinet ministers introduce legislation in their specialized areas. They also speak about government actions in those areas when questioned by MPs in the House of Commons.



The Senate



The Senate is called the “Chamber of Sober Second Thought.” The Senate is the Upper House of Canada’s parliament. The monarch, through the Governor-General, appoints senators. However, this is done “on advice of the Prime Minister”, which means the Prime Minister selects who is to be appointed. Before June 1965, senators were appointed for life. Now they may hold office until their 75th birthday.

Senators are also members of political parties. At times opposition members in the Senate have more seats than the governing party. Their role in delaying legislation for review is part of their function. However, at times, that “sober second thought” becomes partisan. The current Liberal government has decided that their senators are now independent, no longer part of the Liberal party. That means they are not bound to vote for legislation put forward by the liberal party.

The Senate has equal powers to the House of Commons with some exceptions. The Senate may introduce, amend or reject legislation, just like the House, except legislation involving taxation or finances.

All bills approved by the House of Commons must pass through the Senate. It is supposed to protect against the passage of bills that are potentially harmful. By tradition, senators did not often use the power to vote against legislation from the House. Normally, they “tweak” legislation, but do not make major changes. However, in recent years, that has become more common. In practise, the Senate can also delay or even stop some legislation, by simply not voting on it.

That has started a debate in Canada. Do we really need a senate? Should we limit the senate’s power, or perhaps abolish it all together. However, any such changes would require constitutional amendments. Those require the approval of seven provinces which have at least 50% of the population of Canada. That also makes changes very difficult to achieve.



Governor-General



The government recommends to the Monarch (the Queen) the person it wishes to be Governor-General. The Monarch appoints that person, usually for a 5- to 7-year term. The Governor-General represents the monarch in Canada. The Governor-General must sign all bills [royal assent] approved by the House of Commons and the Senate before they become law.

After an election, the Governor-General “requests” the party with the most seats to form the government, and appoints its leader prime minister. If no one party has a majority, then two or more parties may build an alliance, a coalition, to form a government. If they together have a majority of the seats in the House of Commons, one of those parties may form the government. This is called a minority government. Sometimes members of both parties in a coalition will have cabinet positions.

On the advice of the Prime Minister, the Governor-General may also dissolve or prorogue parliament, and call a new election.



Elections



Political parties compete in elections to form the next government. The winner of the most seats forms the next government. By-elections are held in individual ridings between general elections if an MP must be replaced. Individual members of parliament may have to resign or decide to retire. Some MPs have died while in office. By-elections in those ridings fill the vacant seats.

STEPS TO AN ELECTION

Currently, when the four-year term of the government is up, the Prime Minister requests the Governor-General to dissolve parliament. The Governor-General cannot refuse that request.

The Prime Minister orders the chief electoral officer [a permanent civil servant who runs Federal elections] to issue writs for a general election. The writs – official calls for a general election – are signed by the Governor-General. They are then sent to each riding's returning officer, who prepares for the election. The Chief Election Officer oversees the whole process. Returning Officers conduct the election in their own ridings.

Any Canadian citizen who is at least 18 years old and a Canadian citizen on the day of the election may vote or run for election.

According to the elections act, the following people may not vote:

- The chief electoral officer
- The assistant chief electoral officer
- The returning officer for each electoral district during the term of office, except when there is a tie vote after a recount
- Judges [except a citizenship judge]
- Incapacitated individuals being treated for mental disease
- Individuals convicted under any law relating to the disqualification of electors for corrupt or illegal practices

The names of candidates for election appear on ballots in alphabetical order by last name. The ballot also will contain the name of the political party they represent.

Voting takes place in each riding at polling stations. Each polling station is run by a deputy returning officer and a polling clerk. There are also scrutineers, unpaid volunteers, who act as watchdogs for individual candidates during the voting and ballot counting.

Some individuals may not be able to vote on election day. Those people may vote at advance polls instead. These are open in each riding several days before the actual election date.



Elections



ELECTION DAY

Polling stations are set up in each riding, sometimes also in hospitals and nursing homes, so all voters may vote. Polling stations are often located in schools and churches.

Voters give their names and addresses to the deputy returning officers. They are checked off on the polling list to show that they have voted.

Each voter receives a folded ballot, initialled on the back by the deputy returning officer. Voters mark their ballots in a private booth at the voting station. They write an X in the circle beside the name of their preferred candidate. Then they refold the ballot and hand it to the deputy returning officer who places it in the sealed ballot box. The refolding prevents the returning officer from seeing how anyone voted.

After the polls close, the deputy returning officer unseals and opens the ballot boxes at each polling station and counts the ballots. Scrutineers are often present to monitor the count. The staff place the counted ballots into envelopes, and the deputy returning officer completes and certifies a statement of the count.

A copy of the certificate of the count is given to each scrutineer. Those certificates may be required if a recount of the ballots is necessary.

Each deputy returning officer sends a count from the poll to the returning officer. That data lets each candidate in a riding know the progress of the voting.

After the election, the returning officer confirms the voting result in an official statement for publication by the government of Canada.

AFTER THE ELECTION

Polling stations are set up in each riding, sometimes also in hospitals and nursing homes, so all voters may vote. Shortly after an election, the Prime Minister calls the new parliament to Ottawa. Each newly elected MP must swear an oath of office before beginning duties in the House of Commons. Then they begin the work of governing the country.

The Prime Minister also appoints cabinet ministers, usually from among elected members of the party. They become the heads of the various departments of the federal government. These departments – also called ministries – put Federal policies into action. They handle day-to-day administration details and work to put government policies into effect. Each department is responsible to parliament through its cabinet minister.

Elected MPs from the governing party usually vote in favour of laws proposed by the government. Opposition MPs usually vote against them. Members of the same party may not always agree with one or other policies of their party. However, their party expects them to vote as the party instructs them. The only exception is a “free vote”. On occasions, party leaders may allow MPs to vote whichever way they wish. For example, parties allowed free votes on issues of conscience such as capital punishment or same sex marriage legislation.

