

Canada's Parliament and other political institutions

SUMMARY

The contemporary federal state of Canada was formed in 1867, when the Province of Canada merged through confederation with two other British colonies in North America, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Canada's 1867 constitution sets out the rules by which the country is governed and divides government responsibilities into three separate branches: parliament, executive and judiciary.

In addition to being a federation, Canada is also a representative democracy and a constitutional monarchy. Queen Elizabeth, who resides in the United Kingdom (UK), is Canada's head of state. Canada's system of government is modelled on the UK's Westminster system. Canada's federal parliament, made up of the Queen and the two houses of Parliament, is both the legislature and the source of executive power: in the tradition of 'responsible government', government ministers are responsible and accountable to parliament, and must answer to it for their actions.

There are three levels of government within Canada: federal, provincial and territorial, and the local levels. Under Canada's federal system, the powers of government are divided between the federal level and the 10 provincial governments, with federal responsibility for the three territories de facto devolved to them. The Supreme Court of Canada is the highest court in the judicial system.

Canada's political system as a federal constitutional monarchy and its Westminster-style democracy resembles that of Australia. Accordingly, this briefing is similar in structure to the February 2020 EPRS briefing [Australia's Parliament and other political institutions](#).



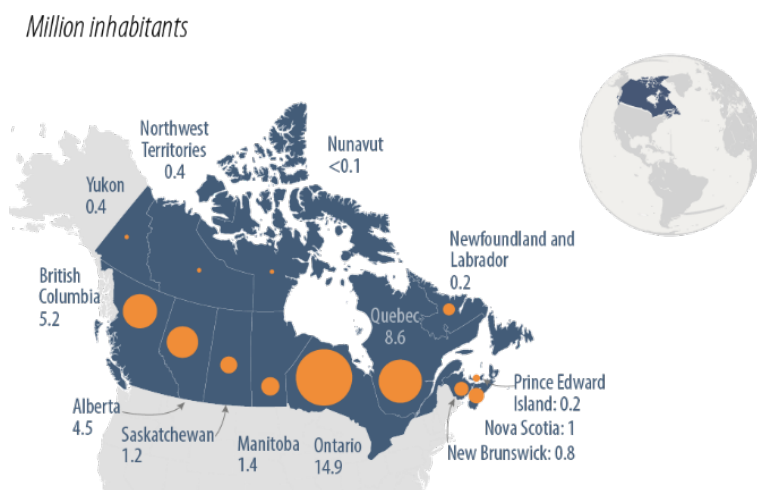
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Introduction

Canada is the world's [second largest country](#) (after Russia) in terms of **landmass**, at approximately **9.1 million square kilometres**. Occupying roughly the northern two fifths of the North American continent, the country is bordered by the Pacific, Arctic and Atlantic Oceans, and has the world's longest coastline. The country shares nearly 9 000 kilometres of land border with the United States (US), with 12 states in the continental US to Canada's south, and the US state of Alaska to Canada's west. Canada is divided into 10 provinces and three territories, each with their own government.¹

Figure 1 - Population of provinces and territories in Canada



Data source: [Population estimates, quarterly](#), Statistics Canada.

Canada's [population](#) is around **38 million**. The territorial size and population of each province and territory varies considerably. Almost nine in ten Canadians (more than 33 million) live in the south-western and south-eastern provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. Canada is a culturally diverse country with an indigenous population, a history of British and French [colonisation](#), as well as significant successive migration that continues to the present day: in 2016, more than [one in five](#) people in Canada were born abroad.

A major developed economy, Canada has the [10th largest economy](#) in the

world, and is a member of both the Group of Twenty (G20) and the Group of Seven (G7). It is the world's fourth-largest oil exporter, and its main trading partner is the US, with which it has a free trade agreement in the form of the United States-Canada-Mexico agreement (USMCA). With a GDP per capita of [US\\$43 258](#) in 2020, the World Bank categorise Canada as a [high-income country](#).

Freedom House ranks Canada as 'free' in its [Freedom in the World 2021](#) report, with a score of 98 out of 100 points. It notes Canada's 'strong history of respect for political rights and civil liberties', as well as efforts by the federal government to address discrimination and other economic, social, and political challenges facing indigenous peoples and other vulnerable populations. However, it also cites concerns about fair elections and transparent governance; humane treatment of prisoners; citizens' right to privacy; and religious and journalistic freedom. In the [2021 World Press Freedom Index](#), Canada is placed 14th out of 180 countries in terms of the level of journalists' freedom.

Canadian political system

Canada is a representative parliamentary democracy built on the model of the UK's Westminster system. However, unlike the UK (but like [Australia](#)), Canada is also a **federal state**, with legislative power divided between the federal, provincial and territorial governments. The distribution of power between the federal levels, and on each level between the legislative, executive and judicial branches, is set out in Canada's 1867 [constitution](#). The 1982 Constitution Act introduced the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and a procedure for amending the constitution. It affirms that Canada's **official languages are English and French**, accounting for the French-speaking province of Quebec. Many important rules of governance are not spelled out in the constitution, but are [unwritten](#) conventions or practices.

Canada is a **constitutional monarchy** and shares a head of state with the UK, Queen Elizabeth, represented in Canada by the [Governor General](#) (currently Mary Simon). Executive authority is

Canada is one of the 54 members of the [Commonwealth](#), a voluntary association of independent states with shared historical membership of the British Empire. The head of the Commonwealth is Queen Elizabeth. Canada is also one of a subset of 15 Commonwealth countries that, despite being independent, recognise Queen Elizabeth as their monarch. These 15 countries, together with the UK, are traditionally known as the Commonwealth realms.

formally vested in the sovereign ('the Crown') and exercised in her name by the Governor General. Crown prerogatives include: giving royal recommendation to bills proposing to spend government revenues; giving royal assent to bills passed by the Senate and the House of Commons so that they become law; appointing holders of many important offices (e.g. judicial and diplomatic); dissolving Parliament before elections, and opening and closing parliamentary sessions; and choosing the prime minister (by convention, the leader of the party with the most seats in the House of Commons following a general election).

In practice, the Governor General appoints the prime minister on the Crown's behalf, based on the ability of the appointee's party to command a majority in Parliament, following parliamentary elections. Other Crown prerogatives are exercised on the advice of the democratically elected government. Consequently, aside from certain 'reserve powers' (see below), the role of head of state is largely symbolic, with the prime minister and their cabinet responsible for governing Canada.

Federal government

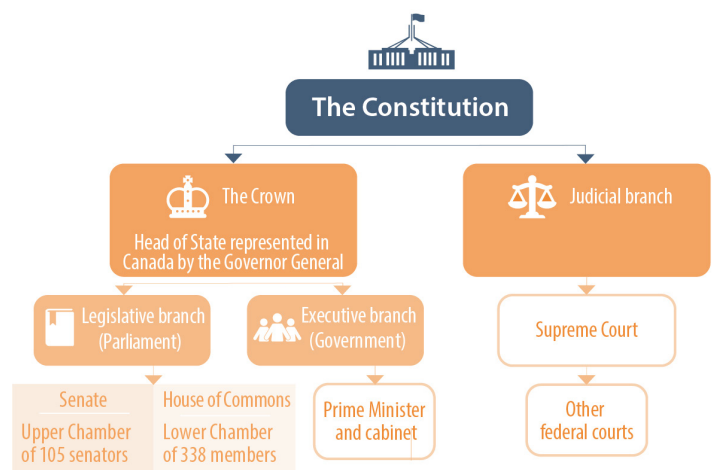
At the top of [Canada's federal system](#) sit the federal legislature, executive and judiciary. The executive (prime minister and ministers) is drawn from the legislature ('parliamentary government'), having won the support of a majority of votes in the House of Commons, the lower house of Canada's bicameral system, based on the results of federal parliamentary elections held at least every four years. Government ministers are thus part of both the executive and the legislature. The government does not require a majority in the upper house, the Senate.

In line with the principle of 'responsible government', the work of ministers is closely examined by other members of parliament under the leadership of an officially recognised [opposition](#), and the government is accountable to the parliament. Moreover, the government must keep the support of the majority of the members in the House of Commons to stay in office. A government formed by the party or a coalition of parties holding most seats in the House of Commons is known as a majority government. When the party in power holds more seats than any other party but falls short of a clear majority in the House, the government is referred to as a minority government. Minority governments must rely on the support of members belonging to other political parties to govern. Should a motion of no confidence be accepted by the House of Commons, by convention, the Government should resign in favour of the official opposition or advise a dissolution of the House of Commons by the governor general.

Legislature

The federal parliament consists of the Queen, represented by the Governor General, and the two Houses of the Parliament, the House of Commons and the Senate.

Figure 2 – Branches of government in Canada



Data source: [House of Commons, Government of Canada](#), EPRS.

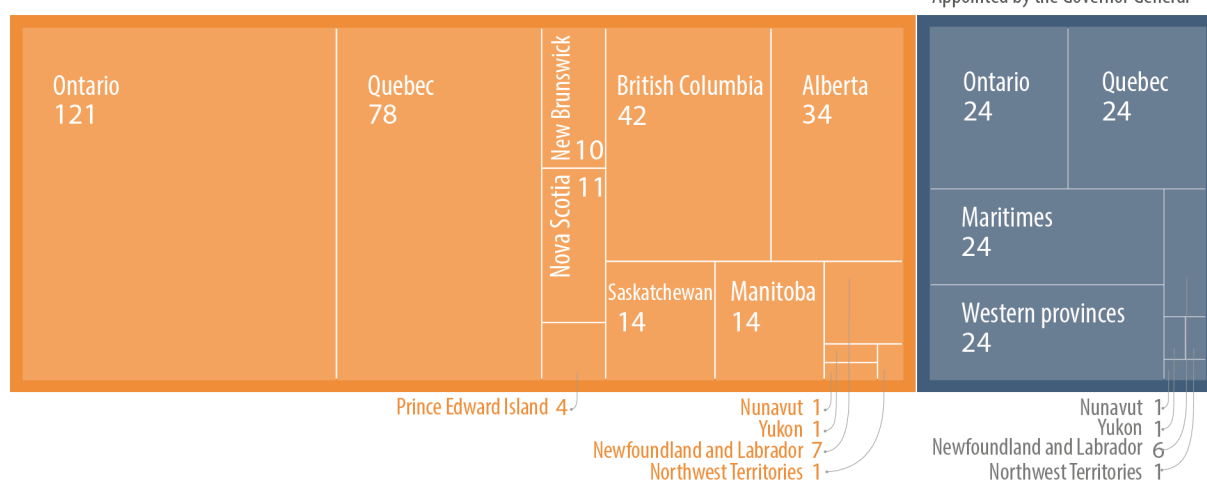
Legislative power of the parliament

Canada's legislature, the [parliament](#), is the federal institution that has the power to make laws, to raise taxes, and to authorise government spending. The Parliament of Canada is bicameral, i.e. it has two chambers: the Senate and the House of Commons. The powers of Canada's parliament, enumerated in Sections 91 and 92(10) of the [Constitution Acts](#), 1867 to 1982, concern matters of national interest: national defence; foreign affairs; employment insurance; banking; federal taxes; the post office; fisheries; shipping; railways; telephones; pipelines; indigenous lands and rights; and criminal law. Sections 91 and 92 confer on the Federal Parliament the power 'to make Laws for the Peace, Order and good Government of Canada, in relation to all Matters not coming within the Classes of Subjects by this Act assigned exclusively to the Legislatures of the Provinces'. This power is '[residuary](#)' in the sense that any matter that does not fall within the power of provincial legislatures falls within the power of the federal parliament. This residuary power ensures that every area of legislation comes under one or both of Canada's two orders of government.

Figure 3 – Summary of electoral rules and their effects on the composition of the two Houses

HOUSE OF COMMONS

- Number of seats depends on population size
- Single mandate electoral districts ('ridings')



Data source: [House of Commons](#).

Structure

Canada has a bicameral parliament. The lower house, the House of Commons, is the elected assembly of the parliament. Its members are elected for four-year terms to represent defined constituencies, known as 'ridings'. There are currently 338 seats in the House of Commons, but this number is set to grow to 342, following a [recalculation](#) of each province's seat allocation by the Chief Electoral Officer (see below). Canada uses the UK-style single-member plurality, or 'first-past-the-post', system.² The candidate with the most votes in a riding wins a seat in the House of Commons and represents that riding as its member of parliament (MP).

Seats are allocated to each province in proportion to their respective populations, using a representation formula found in [Section 51](#) of the constitution, and population estimates provided by Statistics Canada. The most recent allocation took place on 15 October 2021, and resulted in the addition of four seats to the federal parliament, with British Columbia (+1), Alberta (+3) and Ontario (+1) gaining seats, and Quebec losing one seat. The new seat allocation will only take effect when a new [representation order](#) comes into force.

The Senate, or upper House, is [composed](#) of 105 senators (subject to vacancies and 'Section 26 additions' – see below) appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister, to

represent Canada's regions, provinces and territories.³ Once appointed, senators may continue to serve until mandatory retirement at the age of 75. The Speaker of the Senate is appointed for a [non-fixed term](#) by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister, and can be [replaced](#) by the Prime Minister at any time. There is provision under [Section 26](#) of the constitution for 'four or eight' extra senators to be appointed to break a deadlock (i.e. a persistent disagreement over legislation) between the Senate and the House: either one or two each from the four original regions (Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario and Western). This has been used only once, in 1990, by Prime Minister Brian Mulroney in order to ensure passage of a tax bill. Senators must be at least 30 years old, and must hold property worth at least C\$4 000 net, and total net assets of at least C\$4 000. They must reside in the province or territory for which they are appointed.

In the House of Commons, the largest non-governing party (usually the second-largest in the House, as the largest party usually leads the government) [becomes](#) the official Opposition and its leader is termed the leader of the Opposition. They select shadow ministers who, in turn, closely examine the work of the ministers. The leader of the Opposition receives the same salary as a minister. The leader of any party that has at least 12 seats also receives a higher salary than an ordinary MP. Both the Government and the Opposition are also [represented](#) in the Senate, with government senators represented there by the 'leader of the Government', and Opposition senators by another leader of the Opposition.⁴ House of Commons Standing Orders [state](#) that the House shall meet on Mondays at 11:00 a.m., on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays at 10:00 a.m., and on Wednesdays at 2:00 p.m. In 2020, the House of Commons [held](#) 86 sittings, and the Senate held 47 sittings. Electoral years always have a significantly lower number of sitting days.

The parliament works in committees, as well as parliamentary networks and country groups. There are currently 27 [Commons committees](#), 24 [Senate committees](#) and subcommittees, and 3 joint committees between the two houses. Committees of particular interest to the European Parliament include the Foreign Affairs and International Development committee in the Commons, and the Foreign Affairs and International Trade committee in the Senate.

Senators and MPs also take part in activities organised by multilateral and bilateral [parliamentary associations](#). These provide a forum for Senators and Members of Parliament to exchange ideas, information and experiences with their fellow legislators at international level. Senators and Members of Parliament can join eight multilateral parliamentary associations, and five bilateral ones. Associations of importance to the EU include the Canada-Europe parliamentary association, and the Canada-France Inter-Parliamentary Group.

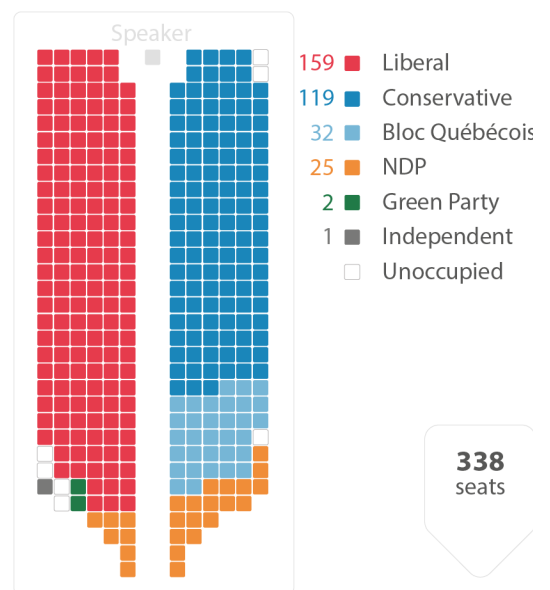
Passing laws

Proposed government legislation is introduced in one of the two chambers, usually the House of Commons, by a minister. Spending or tax bills must begin in the House of Commons. Each bill undergoes a detailed process of review, debate, examination and amendment through both Houses before it is ready to receive final approval. The House of Commons also considers items of private members' business, i.e. bills and motions proposed by members who are not cabinet ministers. To become law, all legislation must be adopted by both Houses in identical form and receive royal assent (the Governor General's signature).

Latest election

Canada's politics have been [described](#) as a 'two-and-a-half party system', dominated by the centrist Liberal Party and

Figure 4 – Distribution of seats in the House of Commons following the September 2021 general election

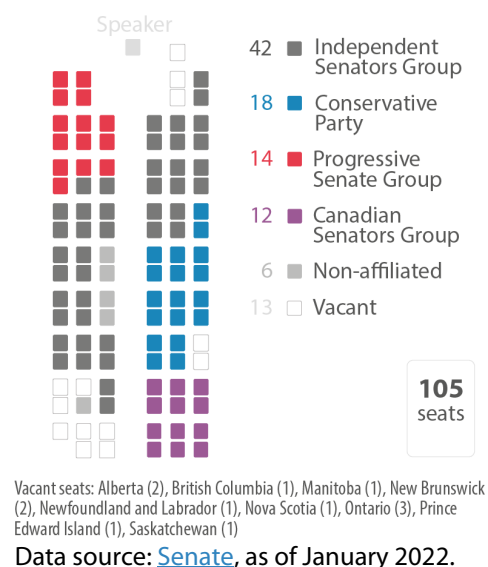


Data source: [House of Commons](#).

the centre-right Conservative Party, with major roles played also by the centre-left New Democratic Party and the Quebec nationalist Bloc Québécois.⁵ The only other party currently represented in the House of Commons is the Green Party. There is also currently one independent MP. In the Senate, the only group of senators formally attached to a political party is the Conservative Party group. The other groupings are: the Canadian Senators group, the Independent Senators group, the Progressive Senate group, and the non-affiliated.

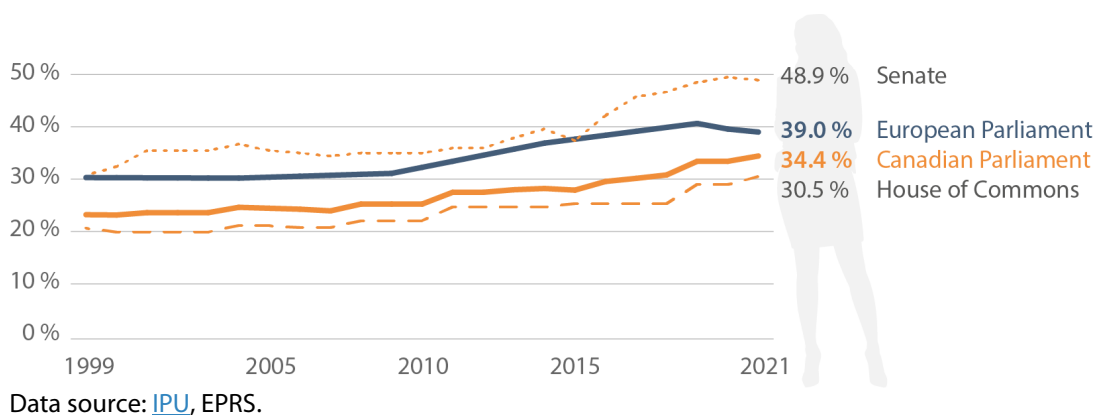
The most recent parliamentary [elections](#) took place in September 2021, after Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called a snap election. They did not fundamentally alter the balance of power in the Commons, with Trudeau's Liberal Party gaining five seats to reach a total of 160 seats, but still falling short of the 170 seats needed to form a majority. As a result, Trudeau continues to lead a minority government. The opposition Conservative Party held steady on 119 seats, despite coming first in the popular vote, as it did in the preceding elections in September 2019.

Figure 5 – Distribution of seats in the Senate



As members of the Senate are not directly elected, but appointed by the Governor General, there is no direct link between general elections and the balance of power in the Senate. Since the Governor General's appointments are made on the advice of the Prime Minister, he or she can alter the political composition of the Senate as vacancies there open up through retirement or resignation.

Figure 6 – Women in parliament



Women in parliament

Since 1921, [women's representation](#) in the Parliament of Canada has gradually increased, reaching a record proportion in 2021. On election day in September 2021, women won 103 of the 338 seats in the House of Commons – 30.5 % of the chamber. It was the first time that the percentage of women in the House of Commons had surpassed 30 %. As of 22 November 2021, women represented 49 % of all senators (13 seats were vacant). As of 1 October 2021, Canada ranked 59th worldwide in terms of women's representation in lower or single houses of national parliaments.

Women's representation has historically been higher in Canada's Senate than in its House of Commons. Senators, unlike MPs, are appointed, and current considerations for the appointment process include achieving gender balance. While gender parity has already been achieved in the Senate (in December 2020, there were 47 women senators and 47 men senators), women remain under-represented in the House of Commons.

In 1993, [Kim Campbell](#) became Canada's first – and, to date, only – female prime minister.

Source: [Library of Parliament of Canada](#).

EU-Canada parliamentary relations

The European Parliament [delegation](#) for relations with Canada (D-CA) was established in 1975 to oversee the Parliament's relations with Canada. Annual inter-parliamentary meetings between Members of the European Parliament and Canadian representatives alternate between Brussels and venues in Canada, as a rule including Ottawa. These meetings usually conclude with the delegates agreeing on a common statement. The most recent, 40th, EU-Canada inter-parliamentary meeting took place on Thursday 14 March 2019 in Strasbourg. Talks focused on political developments in the EU and Canada (elections, migration, environment and climate change, Brexit) and trade. The 2016 [EU-Canada Strategic Partnership Agreement](#) promotes exchanges of delegations from the European and Canadian Parliaments.

Executive

Queen Elizabeth is Queen of Canada and Canada's **head of state**. The constitution vests the executive power of the federation in the Queen and delegates her powers to the Governor General, her representative. By convention, the Governor General acts as advised by the prime minister and ministers. This means that in practice the prime minister and ministers hold the executive power. However, in exceptional circumstances, the Governor General is empowered to act independently in some matters (referred to as '[reserve powers](#)'), such as decisions to dissolve parliament and appoint or dismiss prime ministers. The last time this happened was in 1926, when Governor General Julian Byng [refused](#) the prime minister's request to dissolve Parliament.

Table 1 – Canada's leadership

Position	Name	Start date
Head of state	Queen Elizabeth	1952
Governor General	Mary Simon	2021
House of Commons Speaker	Anthony Rota	2019
Senate Speaker	George Furey	2015
Prime Minister	Justin Trudeau	2015
Chief Justice	Richard Wagner	2017

Source: EPRS.

The Governor General's constitutional duties include: ensuring that Canada always has a prime minister and a government in place that has the confidence of Parliament; swearing into office the prime minister, cabinet ministers and the chief justice of Canada; summoning, proroguing and dissolving Parliament; delivering the Speech from the Throne (the government's agenda); granting royal assent to acts of Parliament; appointing members of the Privy Council, lieutenant governors and certain judges, on the advice of the prime minister; and signing into effect official documents, such as orders-in-council. The Governor General is also Canada's commander-in-chief.

The [prime minister](#), **head of government**, is the elected leader of the party (or of the largest of a group of parties) that holds a majority in the House of Commons. The prime minister selects the ministers from both Houses and assigns their portfolios. The senior government ministers form the [cabinet](#), which – chaired by the prime minister – decides on major policy and legislative proposals. Cabinet ministers are in charge of major government departments, and other ministers manage smaller departments. The Canadian federal civil service includes some 75 government departments.

Judiciary

Canada's [judiciary](#) is represented by the different levels of courts and has the function of resolving conflicts related to laws. It consists of courts of federal and provincial jurisdiction, and is independent of the legislative and executive powers. Only the federal government can [appoint](#) and pay judges of the superior, or upper-level, courts in the provinces. Parliament can also establish a general court of appeal and other courts – it created the Supreme Court of Canada, the Federal Court and the Federal Court of Appeal, as well as the Tax Court. Parliament also has [exclusive](#) law-making

power over criminal law and criminal procedure. Federal authority for criminal law and procedure ensures fair and consistent treatment of criminal behaviour across the country.

The federal government [appoints](#) the judges of the Supreme Court of Canada, federal courts, and provincial and territorial superior courts. The Canadian Judicial Council is responsible for federally appointed judges: its role is to receive complaints relating to the conduct of judges, to review them and to recommend corrective measures, up to and including the dismissal of the offending judge. Federally appointed judges may remain in office until the age of 75.

Impact of the pandemic on Canadian civil liberties

By the end of 2021, at least 30 000 people in Canada had died of Covid-19, according to [Our World in Data](#). Like other countries, Canada has sought to manage the impact of the pandemic on its population and healthcare system by introducing federal, regional and local-level [restrictions](#) on people's movement and workplace conditions, of varying reach and duration. Although the federal government chose not to declare a 'public welfare emergency' under the 1985 [Emergencies Act](#), all provinces declared states of emergency pursuant to provincial law, giving them additional powers to restrict citizens' rights, including prohibitions on events and gatherings of more than five people, and the closure of non-essential businesses, public facilities and services. Certain provinces restricted movement across and within provincial borders. For example, the Quebec government restricted movement across its borders with Ontario, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador.

During the pandemic, civil rights groups announced constitutional challenges against certain Covid-19 measures. In Canada, civil liberties are protected by the [Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms](#). These rights are not unlimited. Rather, they are 'subject to such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society'. [In other words](#), they must be supported by evidence and be proportionate.

Source: [Library of Parliament of Canada](#).

Provincial and territorial government

Under Canada's federal system, the national government [shares](#) power and authority with the 10 provinces and three territories. Each of the provinces is governed by its own unicameral assembly, but Canada's provincial and territorial institutions otherwise largely mirror its federal ones. There is a clear constitutional [distinction](#) between provinces and territories. While provinces exercise constitutional powers in their own right, the territories exercise delegated powers under the authority of the Parliament of Canada. Historically, this authority has meant that the country's sparsely populated north was largely governed by federal officials.⁶ However, over the past 40 years, federal statutes have established a legislative assembly and executive council for each territory, and province-like powers are increasingly being transferred or 'devolved' to territorial governments. Canada's federal government uses a [programme](#) of 'equalisation payments' to even out disparities in resources between more and less wealthy provinces. There is a separate transfer programme for the territories referred to as '[territorial formula financing](#)'.

Legislature

Canada's [provincial legislatures](#) are elected legislative assemblies. Constitutionally, the [territories](#) fall under federal control, but in practice province-like powers are largely devolved to the territories as well. The Constitution Act 1982 gives each province the power to amend the constitution as it applies to their province. However, assent of the House of Commons and Senate (along with that of the Crown) is also required. Territorial constitutions are federal statutes; so only the federal Parliament can amend them.

In the same way that it lists the powers of the federal government, the 1867 Constitution Act lists the powers of the provinces, including: direct taxes; hospitals; prisons; education; marriage; and property and civil rights. The Act also states that the power over agriculture and immigration should be shared between the federal and provincial governments.

Today, all 10 provinces have a unicameral system composed of a single elected chamber, varying in size from 27 members in Prince Edward Island to 125 in Quebec. Four provinces [originally](#) had a bicameral legislature made up of an elected assembly and an appointed legislative council: Quebec (1867–1968); New Brunswick (1867–1892); Nova Scotia (1867–1928); and Manitoba (1870–1876). Prince Edward Island also had a bicameral legislature, but with an elected council until 1893.

Executive

At provincial level, the Crown is [represented](#) through the office of each province's lieutenant-governor. The lieutenant-governor assents to legislation as the representative of the Crown. Public policy-making and administration are controlled by an executive council or cabinet; it comprises elected ministers of the Crown and is headed by a premier. A governing cabinet is selected by the premier from the provincial legislative assembly. The federal parliament and all provincial and territorial legislatures have enacted legislation setting [fixed election dates](#), which typically (as at federal level) take place every four years. In each case, the Governor General or lieutenant-governor can dissolve parliament before the next [scheduled](#) election date.

Since [most](#) of the territories are under federal jurisdiction, they do not have Crown representatives. Territorial governments are instead headed by commissioners, who are appointed by the federal government, which the commissioner represents in the territory. However, the role of commissioner has become increasingly ceremonial as federal control over the territories has devolved.

Judiciary

The court [system](#) is roughly the same across Canada. With the exception of Nunavut, each province has three levels: provincial and territorial, or lower, courts; superior courts; and appeal courts. The [Nunavut Court of Justice](#) has a single-level trial court. Provincial courts try most criminal offences, money matters and family matters. In private-law cases involving breach of contract or other claims of harm, the courts apply common-law principles in nine provinces and the territories. In Quebec, courts apply the Quebec Civil Code. Provincial courts may also include specialised courts, such as youth courts, family courts, and small claims courts. Each provincial government appoints the judges for its own courts: provincial and territorial governments [appoint](#) provincial and territorial court judges, apart from provincial and territorial superior court judges, which are appointed and paid by the federal government.

Local government

There are [more than 4 500](#) incorporated municipalities and local government districts in Canada. Unlike the federal and provincial government, municipal government is [not](#) a 'constitutional order of government'. Municipalities are established by the provincial legislatures, which delegate some of their powers to municipal governments, be they counties, cities, towns, villages, townships, rural municipalities, or municipal districts. Municipal governments are [responsible](#) for areas such as libraries, parks, community water systems, local police, roadways and parking. They receive authority for these areas from the provincial governments.

Legislature and executive

The [Municipal Government Act](#) (MGA) [provides](#) that councils can only exercise the powers of the municipal corporation in the proper form, by either 'bylaw' or 'resolution'. Municipal councils comprise councillors and are

Indigenous local government

First Nations may be organised into federally recognised 'bands'. Across the country there are also elected [band councils](#), which are a form of municipal government for indigenous First Nations communities (see below – 'Indigenous peoples in Canada'). As of 2020, the federal government recognised 619 First Nations in Canada, each with their own elected band administration. Bands thus operate as local governments for recognised First Nation communities, consisting of one chief and one councillor for every 100 band members. Alongside the elected and federally recognised band chief, some bands may also recognise a separate hereditary chief, not officially recognised by the federal government. This division of functions can cause administrative and political [friction](#).

led by a mayor who bears the title 'chief officer', 'chief executive officer' or 'head of council'. That official, in addition to performing a councillor's duties, must preside when attending a council meeting, unless a bylaw provides otherwise. The mayor or their equivalent must also perform any other duty imposed under the MGA or any other enactment. In practice, the mayor is also generally the main spokesperson for the municipality, unless that duty is delegated to another councillor.

The mayor of a city or town is elected by a vote of a municipality's electors, unless the council passes a bylaw requiring council to appoint the mayor from among the councillors. The role includes chairing the council, undertaking representational and ceremonial duties, and liaising with other levels of government.

Intergovernmental cooperation

Managing [intergovernmental relations](#) is an important aspect of Canadian federalism, as there are few issues in public policy that do not cross jurisdictional lines, and few areas in which the actions of one government do not affect other governments. One salient example of this is Canada's [response](#) to the Covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, relations with other governments are a major concern of all the Canadian jurisdictions, and governments have developed mechanisms to coordinate their responses to intergovernmental issues.

Canada has not anchored its intergovernmental structures and processes formally in its constitution. Rather, its intergovernmental mechanisms have evolved in response to changing political dynamics. Overall responsibility is normally held at federal level by the prime minister and at provincial/territorial level by premiers. At federal level, the prime minister is assisted by a minister of intergovernmental affairs with specific responsibilities in the area, and supported by a secretariat within the Privy Council Office. Provinces and territories have either a department, a secretariat or a coordinating unit within the Executive Office responsible for intergovernmental relations.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism in Canada is both a [sociological fact](#) and a policy framework that has evolved over time. The last published [census](#) in 2016 showed that 21.9 % of Canada's population was born in another country.⁷ As a percentage of its population, Canada has the highest number of [foreign-born residents](#) among the G7 countries. According to the 2016 census, most people who immigrated to the country between 2011 and 2016 were from the Philippines (15.6 %), followed by India (12.1 %) and China (10.6 %). During that period, large numbers of immigrants also came from Iran, Pakistan, the US, Syria, the UK, France and South Korea. This diverse demographic reflects the late-20th-century [relaxation](#) of rules previously restricting immigration to European countries of origin.

Multiculturalism as a federal policy framework [emerged](#) in the 1960s and 1970s. It initially faced resistance from parts of the country, such as in Quebec, over its relationship with Canada's traditional bicultural and bilingual heritage. Over time, Quebec has developed its own immigration and multiculturalism policies.

French-Canadian nationalism and Quebec separatism

Canada's [history](#) of settlement and colonisation entailed three founding groups – indigenous, French, and British – later joined by many other racial and ethnic groups. French and British colonisers began arriving in the early 1600s, and at the time of Confederation (1867), Canada's population was chiefly British (60 %) and French (30 %). By 1981, the combination of a declining birth rate and ongoing immigration saw the British and French populations decline to 40 % and 27 %, respectively. At the beginning of the 21st century, the proportion of people with British, French, and/or 'Canadian' (indigenous) ethnic origins had dropped to 46 %. In 2016, 29.8 % of Canadians reported being able to conduct a conversation in French, down from 30.1% in 2011. However, over the same period, the number of people who could conduct a conversation in French still rose in absolute terms by 400 000 to nearly 10.4 million people. Both French and English are

[official languages](#) of Canada, and the 1969 [Official Languages Act](#) grants both languages equal status throughout the federal administration. In 2016, approximately 87 % of Canada's more than 7.9 million native French-speakers resided in the province of Quebec.

Over the course of the Canadian confederation, and particularly in the second half of the 20th century, [French-Canadian nationalists](#) have favoured some form of unique constitutional status for Quebec, from special status within the confederation, to complete independence as a sovereign country. During the late 1960s, the movement was motivated primarily by the belief, shared by many Quebec intellectuals and labour leaders, that the economic difficulties of Quebec were caused by English-Canadian domination of the confederation, and could only be ended by altering or terminating the ties with other provinces and the central government. In the late 20th century, economic conditions began to improve, and cultural and linguistic differences became the primary motivation for the resurgence of Quebec separatist sentiment in the 1990s. Today the Bloc Québécois party holds 32 of Québec's 78 seats in Canada's House of Commons, while the governing Liberal party holds 35. At the September 2021 election, the Bloc Québécois [advocated](#) further devolution of powers to Québec, including allowing the province to sign international treaties.

Indigenous peoples in Canada

In Canada, the term '[indigenous peoples](#)' refers to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. These are the original inhabitants of the land that is now Canada. The Inuit primarily inhabit the northern regions of Canada. Their homeland, known as Inuit Nunangat, includes much of the land, water and ice contained in the Arctic region. Métis peoples are of mixed European and indigenous ancestry, and live mostly in the Prairie Provinces and Ontario. First Nations peoples often occupy territories south of the Arctic. In the [2016 census](#) by Statistics Canada, over 1.6 million people in Canada identified as indigenous, making up 4.9 % of the national population. Throughout modern Canada's history, indigenous cultures have been [threatened](#), and in certain cases extinguished, by colonisation.

The (amended) 1876 [Indian Act](#) – the principal statute through which the federal government manages a variety of issues concerning Indigenous affairs – further divides Indigenous peoples into two categories: 'status Indians' and 'non-status Indians'. Status Indians are individuals who are listed in the [Indian Register](#) and are issued identification cards that contain information about their identity, band and registration number. Non-Status Indians are indigenous peoples who are not registered with the federal government. All indigenous peoples in Canada are protected by [Section 35](#) of the 1982 Constitution Act, which enshrines indigenous rights. The federal government departments responsible for the affairs of indigenous peoples are Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada ([CIRNAC](#)) and Indigenous Services Canada ([ISC](#)).

There are persistent gaps between the [social and economic conditions](#) of indigenous and non-indigenous Canadians. In 2019, the employment rate for indigenous peoples was lower than that for the non-indigenous population (57.5 % compared with 62.1 %). The rate for First Nations people over 15 years old was 53.8 %, 61.3 % for the Métis and 49 % for the Inuit. Indigenous peoples' education and income levels also tend to be below the Canadian average. In 2016, 68.3 % of the Indigenous population aged 25 to 64 had a post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree, compared with 70.4 % of the non-Indigenous population. In the same year, the median after-tax income for non-indigenous people was 31 144 Canadian dollars (C\$), whereas, for those who identified as First Nations it was C\$21 253, for Métis, C\$29 068, and for Inuit, C\$23 635.

In other respects, too, indigenous Canadians' prospects lag behind those of non-indigenous Canadians: [life expectancy](#) can be 10 to 15 years shorter and infant mortality rates can be two to four times higher. Suicide rates among First Nations young people are around five to six times the national average, while Inuit youth suicide rates are approximately 10 times the national average. Indigenous peoples are also over-represented in the criminal justice system as offenders and inmates: in 2017, indigenous peoples made up 20 % of the total imprisoned population compared with their 4.9 % share of the Canadian population. Nevertheless, some of these statistics have

[improved](#) over time, and the federal government continues to [invest](#) in housing, employment, education, health, justice, family and cultural services for indigenous Canadians.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The 10 provinces are Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan. The three territories are Northwest Territories, Yukon and Nunavut.
- ² This is not true of all Westminster-style democracies. [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#), for example, now use proportional electoral systems.
- ³ For the purpose of allocating Senate seats geographically, Canada's provinces were originally grouped into the following four regions: the Western Provinces, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes. Newfoundland and Labrador and the three territories are represented separately in the Senate.
- ⁴ Over the course of its existence, there have been various proposals for reforming Canada's Senate, most [recently](#) by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, who instructed his Liberal Party Senators to re-group as 'independents', and soon after winning office in 2015 set up an Independent Advisory Board for Senate Appointments, with the stated aim of making the chamber less partisan, more independent and more diverse.
- ⁵ As a result of the May 2011 election, the New Democratic Party overtook the Liberal Party to become the official Opposition until December 2015, when the status was reclaimed by the Conservative Party.
- ⁶ The Northwest Territories, the Yukon and Nunavut are Canada's three largest territories. They lie mainly north of 60 degrees north latitude. They account for 40 % of Canada's landmass, while representing approximately 3 % of the Canadian population.
- ⁷ The [results of the 2021 census](#) were published on 9 February 2022, but the thematic presentation of Canada's shifting demographic profile [will only be published](#) on 27 April 2022.

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