

Civics terms and definitions

autocracy: A system of government in which one or a few people make decisions for a larger group without getting any input from the people who'll be affected by the decision (sometimes called a "dictatorship")

bill: New legislation, or changes to an existing law proposed to Parliament. Bills must be debated and passed by both the House of Commons and the Senate before they become laws.

Bloc Québécois (BQ): A federal political party in Canada that is committed to the protection of Quebec's interests in the House of Commons of Canada, and the promotion of sovereignty for Quebec.

branches of government: In Canada, the three branches – executive, legislative, and judicial – that make up the federal and provincial governments. See also: **executive branch; judicial branch; legislative branch**

Cabinet: The Cabinet consists of all Ministers who are appointed on the recommendation of the Prime Minister from among the members of the House of Commons, and usually at least one from the Senate (including the Leader of the Government in the Senate). The Cabinet decides the Government's priorities and policies, determines the legislation that will be presented to Parliament, and raises and spends revenues.

Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms: The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is the Supreme Law of Canada and is very difficult to change and oppose. It is interpreted by the Supreme

Court of Canada. It promotes equality and protects our human rights. Before 1982 it was called the Bill of Rights – a statute – which meant that, unlike the *Charter*, it was relatively easy to change.

candidate: A person who seeks election to public office. A candidate running in a federal election or by-election is trying to be elected a Member of Parliament and often belongs to a political party. Candidates' signs appear in each electoral district.

Chamber: One of two large rooms in the Centre Block where proceedings of the Senate and the House of Commons take place. Traditionally, the Senate Chamber is red and the House of Commons is green.

charitable organizations: A type of non-profit organization (NPO). Their purpose is usually centered on philanthropic goals as well as social well-being (e.g., charitable, educational, religious, or other activities serving the public interest or common good).

citizen: An inhabitant of a city, town, or country. Also, a person who is legally entitled to exercise the rights and freedoms of the country in which he or she lives

citizenship: An understanding of the rights of citizens within various communities (local, national, and global), and of the roles, responsibilities, and actions associated with these rights

civics: A branch of politics that focuses on the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. See also: **citizenship**

civil rights: Civil rights can vary from country to country and are rights that depend on the law of the nation.

colonialism: The establishment of a colony in one territory by a political power from another territory. The initial incursion into the

territory is followed with the maintenance, expansion, and exploitation of that colony. It usually involves the subjugation of the established group of people by the newcomers.

common good: The well-being of all or most of the people in a community or society, as well as of components of the natural environment. Factors such as peace, justice, economic fairness, and respect for human rights and the environment contribute to the common good.

community/communities: A group of people who have shared histories, culture, beliefs, and/or values. Communities can also be identified on the basis of shared space, ethnicity, religion, and/or socio-economic status. A person may belong to more than one community (e.g., a school community, town, ethnic group, nation, etc.).

community-based organization (CBO): A community-based organization is representative of a community or a significant segment of a community, and is engaged in meeting human, educational, environmental, or public safety community needs.

confederation: The federal union of all of the Canadian provinces and territories

Conservative Party of Canada: A political party in Canada (sometimes called “the Tories”). It is positioned to the right of centre on the Canadian political spectrum.

constituency: The specific geographic area in Canada that a Member of Parliament represents in the House of Commons, also known as a riding or electoral district. In the House of Commons, the member is identified by the name of the riding rather than by his or her own name.

constitution:* A set of rules that define the political principles, the institutions, the powers, and the responsibilities of a state. The Canadian Constitution is made up of three elements: a written constitution, legislation, and an unwritten constitution (rules of common law and conventions). See also: ***Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms***

constitutional monarchy:* A form of government in which executive (Crown) powers are exercised by or on behalf of the sovereign and on the basis of ministerial advice. Canada is a constitutional monarchy.

culture: The customary beliefs, values, social forms, and material traits of an ethnic, religious, or social group

democracy: A form of government in which laws are made by a direct vote of the citizens (direct democracy) or by representatives on their behalf (indirect democracy). In an indirect, or representative, democracy such as Canada, elected representatives vote on behalf of their constituents. A system of government in which citizens choose leaders by voting

dictatorship: An extreme example of an autocratic system. The ruler (dictator) has absolute authority, and makes all decisions. He or she likely uses an army to hold power and carry out decisions.

election: The process of choosing a representative by vote. In a federal general election, the voters in each riding elect one representative to the House of Commons. The person who gets the most votes represents the riding. Generally, the party that has the most members elected forms the Government.

electoral district: Another word for a riding or constituency

executive branch:* The branch of government that carries out the law; the Cabinet and ruling government that sit in the elected Chamber (House of Commons/Legislature). Also referred to as “The Queen in Council.” See also: **branches of government; judicial branch; legislative branch**

first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system: A voting system, used in Canada, in which the person with the most votes in a riding wins the seat for his or her political party. See also: **voting system**

federal government: This level of government deals with areas of law listed in the Constitution Act, 1867, which generally affect the whole country.

federal system: A system of government in which several political jurisdictions form a unity, but retain autonomy in defined areas. The central or national government is called the federal government. Canada has a federal system of government.

fundamental freedoms: In Canada, everyone has the following fundamental freedoms: (a) freedom of conscience and religion; (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication; (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and (d) freedom of association.

government: The party with the most elected members in the House of Commons usually forms the Government. In the federal Government, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet determine priorities and policies, guide the legislation through the House of Commons, and ensure implementation. The Cabinet is responsible to Parliament. If the Government loses a major vote in the House, the Cabinet resigns.

Governor General:* The personal representative of the Queen, who acts on her behalf in performing certain duties. He/she is appointed by the Queen (on the advice of the Prime Minister) to be her representative as Head of State in Canada. Acting on the advice of the Prime Minister, the Governor General calls and dissolves Parliament, reads the Speech from the Throne, gives Royal Assent to bills, and signs many other state documents. The Governor General receives diplomatic representatives and performs many ceremonial and social duties.

grassroots organization: Usually a not-for-profit organization run by the common or ordinary people, not by the upper class or elite of an organization. Often, Grassroots Support Organizations (GSOs) provide services and support to local groups of disadvantaged rural or urban households and individuals.

Green Party of Canada: A Canadian federal political party founded in 1983. The Greens support a broad multi-issue political platform that reflects its core values of ecological wisdom, social justice, grassroots democracy, and non-violence.

House: One of two large rooms in the Centre Block where proceedings of the House of Commons take place. Traditionally, the House of Commons is green. See also: **Chamber**

House of Commons: The elected Lower House of Parliament is composed of 338 members representing all the ridings across Canada. Most of the laws passed by Parliament originate in the House of Commons. Members' duties include representing constituents' concerns, serving on committees, proposing legislation, participating in Commons debates,

and discussing and amending bills. See also: **legislature**

human rights: Human rights are universal rights, believed to belong justifiably to every person.

inquiry process: The process used to investigate civic issues, events, and developments; track down solutions to problems; reach supportable conclusions; and develop plans of action. The inquiry process has five basic components: formulating questions, gathering and organizing information; analyzing and interpreting information; evaluating and forming conclusions; and then communicating the findings or results. See also: **political inquiry process**

judicial branch:* The branch of government that interprets the law – in other words, the courts. Also referred to as “The Queen in Banco” or “The Queen on the Bench.” See also: **branches of government; executive branch; legislative branch**

legislation: The law or set of laws made by a government; also the action or process of making laws; and in Canada, the Acts passed by Parliament that eventually become the law

legislative branch:* The branch of government that makes the laws – the Parliament of Canada and provincial and territorial legislatures. Also referred to as “The Queen in Parliament.” See also: **branches of government; executive branch; judicial branch**

legislature:* The federal legislature (Parliament of Canada) consists of the Queen, the Senate, and the House of Commons. The provincial legislatures consist of the lieutenant governor and the elected house.

Liberal Party of Canada: Sometimes called by its nickname “the Grits,” it is the oldest federal political party in Canada. The party believes in the principles of liberalism, and generally sits at the centre of the Canadian political spectrum.

lobbyist: Individuals and groups who actively communicate with federal public office holders in order to try to influence government decisions. They are required under the Lobbyists Registration Act to register their activities, provide information on their clients and the subject matter of their lobbying activity, and adhere to standards of conduct for communicating with federal public office holders.

municipal government: In Canada, one of the levels of government below that of the provinces. The Constitution gives the provinces jurisdiction over municipal affairs.

New Democratic Party of Canada: The NDP are a social-democratic party, meaning that they position themselves left of centre on the political spectrum. The NDP became a new federal political party in the early 1960s and Tommy Douglas, the “father of Medicare,” became the first leader.

non-governmental organization (NGO): An organization that operates independently of governments, typically providing a social or public service (e.g., Doctors Without Borders, Free the Children, Nature Conservancy of Canada). Typically, NGOs are non-profit-making, non-violent organizations that work to influence or complement government services and/or international organizations.

not-for-profit corporation (NFPC) or non-profit organization: A not-for-profit organization is a type of organization that does not earn profits for its owners.

objectives and results: The varied intended and unintended effects of civic policies or decisions on different groups of people. The political thinking concept of objectives and results is used to guide your analysis when you're looking at the factors that lead to events, policies, decisions, and plans of civic importance. You can also use an objectives-and-results analysis to compare the initial purpose of a decision with its actual effect, so that you can see which results were intended and which were not.

political equality: Every citizen has the same right to vote and run for office, and to speak on public issues.

political inquiry process: The process used to investigate civic issues, events, and developments; track down solutions to problems; reach supportable conclusions; and develop plans of action. The inquiry process has five basic components: formulating questions, gathering and organizing information; analyzing and interpreting information; evaluating and forming conclusions; and then communicating your findings or results. See also: **inquiry process**

political perspective: The political thinking concept of political perspective can be used to analyze the beliefs and values of various groups, including different governments, in local, national, and/or global communities.

political significance: The political thinking concept of political significance is used to guide your analysis when you want to understand which policies, issues, developments, or people are important today.

political thinking concepts: The concepts of political significance, objectives and results, political perspective, and stability

and change can be used as ways of thinking about political inquiries and issues. Each concept gives you a different lens through which to view and filter your information, allowing you to look at issues and evidence in a number of different lights.

politics: The process that's used to make formal, civic decisions

primary sources: Artefacts and oral, print, media, or computer materials created during the period of time under study

Prime Minister: The head of the government in a parliamentary democracy, including Canada. The Prime Minister is the leader of the party that is in power and that normally has the largest number of the seats in the House of Commons.

provincial government: In the 10 Canadian provinces, the provincial government is responsible for areas listed in the Constitution Act, 1867, such as education, health care, some natural resources, and road regulations. Sometimes, they share responsibility with the federal government. The three territories in Canada have their own governments, with responsibilities that are given to them by the federal government.

Queen: Canada's Head of State is the Queen – Queen Elizabeth II – because Canada is a constitutional monarchy. All federal laws are enacted in the Queen's name. Usually, the Governor General represents the Queen in Canada and performs the ceremonial duties of the Queen.

referendum: An electoral event in which voters (electors) are asked to answer "Yes" or "No" to a written question. Referendums are used by governments to consult citizens directly on specific issues. The most recent federal referendum was in 1992, involving

a proposal to amend the Constitution. One of the most famous referendums in Canada was the one held in Quebec in 1995, in which voters decided that Quebec should remain a part of Canada.

responsible government: A government that is responsible to the people, based on the principle that governments must be responsible to the people's representatives

riding: Another word for constituency or electoral district

rights: Entitlements recognized and protected by law

rule of law: The fundamental constitutional principle that no governments or persons are above the law and that society is governed by laws that apply fairly to all people. In other words, citizens, leaders, and government are subject to the same known, predictable, and impartial laws.

secondary sources: sources of information that are a step removed from the original source. These are materials that describe, summarize, analyze, evaluate, are derived from, or are based on primary source materials. Such a source may provide criticism or interpretation of a primary source. Some examples include books, review articles, biographies, documentary films, music, art, and articles about people and events from the past.

Senate: The Upper House of Parliament is made up of appointed Senators. They examine and revise legislation; investigate national issues; and represent regional, provincial, and minority interests. The Senate also introduces its own bills, subject to certain constitutional limitations. Senate committees are frequently set up to examine specific social and economic issues in detail. See also: **legislature**

Senator: In federal politics, a member of the Canadian Senate. He/she is a person appointed to the Upper House of Parliament by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister. At present, there are 105 Senators representing different regions of Canada.

social justice: A concept based on the belief that each individual and group within a given society has a right to equal opportunity and civil liberties, and to exercise the social, educational, economic, institutional, and moral freedoms and responsibilities of that society.

social welfare programs: Government programs designed to help meet the personal, economic, emotional, and/or physical needs of citizens

stability and change: The political thinking concept of stability and change can be used to examine how and why political institutions and government policies change over time or why they remain the same.

United Nations: An inter-governmental organization formed in 1945 to promote peace and economic development

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A document adopted by the United Nations in 1948 setting out the basic rights and freedoms of all people

universal suffrage: The extension of the right to vote to all adult citizens

Upper Chamber: One of two large rooms in the Centre Block where proceedings of the Senate take place. Traditionally, the Senate Chamber is red.

vote: To express a choice in order to reach a decision. In the Senate and House of Commons, members can vote either verbally or by standing in their places. In Canada, eligible citizens vote for their representatives

by secret ballot.

voter turnout rates: The percentage of eligible voters who cast ballots in national elections

voting: The act of expressing an opinion by a show of hands or ballot, usually with the intent of electing a candidate to office or passing a resolution

voting system: The rules and processes by which governments are elected. Canada has a first-past-the-post voting system. See also: **first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system**

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Definitions for three levels of government: http://www.lop.parl.gc.ca/About/Parliament/Education/ourcountryourparliament/html_booklet/three-levels-government-e.html