

Democratic Vision and Values

Our democracy is built first and foremost on a shared vision that puts citizens first. It is a vision based on core democratic principles such as one person-one vote, representation by population, the secret ballot, and elections every 4 or 5 years. It is meant to be open and participatory, both responding to and representing the views of all people.

Some History

New Brunswick's system of responsible government is based on electing individual members to represent our local and provincial interests in a legislative assembly. An executive or government is drawn from members of the legislative assembly. Laws are passed, debates are held, expenditures are approved, and government is scrutinized in the legislature. Inherited from Britain, it is based on over two centuries of tradition and history. Generally, it has served us well.

Our current form and style of government has evolved considerably since its foundation in 1784, to become fairer and more democratic. It was not always so. Originally, only men who were property owners could vote. Women received the right to vote only in 1919; Aboriginals in 1963. At first, there was no secret ballot.

The Commission's mandate, to consider how to strengthen our current democratic institutions and practices is, therefore, very much part of New Brunswick tradition.

Democratic Evolution in New Brunswick

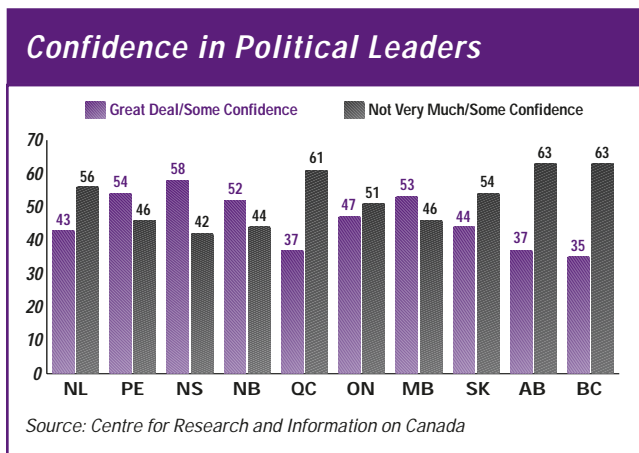
- 1785** *Elections for first provincial legislative assembly*
- 1795** *First law regulating provincial elections adopted*
- 1830** *Catholics eligible to run for Legislative Assembly seats*
- 1855** *Introduction of the secret ballot*
- 1919** *Women won right to vote provincially*
- 1934** *Women won right to be elected to provincial office*
- 1963** *Aboriginal people able to vote*
- 1967** *First woman elected to provincial legislature*
- 1971** *Voting age lowered from 21 to 18*
- 1974** *New Brunswick moved from multi-member to single-member electoral districts.*

Today, New Brunswick's society continues to evolve. We are more diverse and open – socially as well as economically. We are officially bilingual with two official linguistic communities. Our urban centers have grown. Technology and innovation have taken root. We are Canada's most trade-reliant province, exporting around the globe.

Confidence and Trust

Nevertheless, our democracy is facing certain challenges. Voter turnout in the 2003 election was the lowest since 1967. In four elections from 1987 to 1999, the opposition never managed to win more than one-fifth of the seats at any one time. Representation of women in the legislature has declined. Trust in our political institutions is not as high as it once was.

In fact, confidence and trust in political leaders, governments, and political parties has declined across Canada, as measured by the Centre for Research and Information on Canada. Although New Brunswick leaders and institutions actually rate higher than those in some other provinces, people's attitudes towards political and governmental leadership are generally negative.



Have our democratic institutions and practices kept up? Are they able to respond effectively to changing needs and ongoing demands? Is our voting system the right one for our province? Does our democratic system allow for your voice to be heard?

Some Values to Consider

These questions and issues are really about democratic values, and what kind of democracy we want.

Here are eight important values and questions to consider for stronger democratic institutions and practices in our province:

- **Fair** – Fairness means that the electoral system should be fair to voters, parties, and candidates. Is our system free of built-in biases that distort election results?
- **Equal** – Equality means that all votes should count equally with each having equal weight. Do all votes count equally or are votes “wasted” and therefore not reflected in seat results? Are our ridings generally of the same size so each vote is of generally equal weight across the province?
- **Representative** – Representation is the purpose of voting - we elect representatives to make decisions on our behalf and we expect them to both represent and reflect the make-up of our society as a whole. Does our electoral system produce results that broadly reflect the way our society looks?
- **Open** – Openness is the basis of a transparent, accountable, and participatory democracy for people. Is our current democratic system easy to access and understand? Does government provide enough opportunities for you to participate and make your views known?
- **Effective** – An effective government and legislature is essential for economic and social progress in a modern democracy. Do our current electoral system and democratic processes provide for stable, working governments and legislatures that are effective and able to govern?
- **Accountable** – Accountability requires governments and legislatures to justify their actions on a regular basis, while allowing voters to pass judgment on their representatives, at election time. Can voters clearly identify who is responsible for decisions and hold them accountable? Does the system produce an effective opposition?
- **Inclusive** – Inclusion of people and viewpoints is at the heart of a participatory democracy. Does our democratic system try to accommodate smaller parties and minority viewpoints? Do people have a chance to participate in decisions affecting them?
- **Choice** – Choosing candidates, parties, and leaders at election time is the central democratic action of voters. Do voters have a range of democratic choices in parties and candidates at election time to help ensure diversity of opinions and to promote accountability?