

If five years pass without an election, Parliament is dissolved through the expiry of its mandate, and an election automatically becomes necessary. More often, before the end of this term, the Prime Minister fixes an election date. Prime Ministers do not like to appear fearful of an election by putting it off until required to call one. Normally, an election takes place four years or so after the previous one. In a minority-government situation, however (where no party has an absolute majority in the House of Commons), the vote is likely to come sooner, since the Government is more vulnerable.

Election arrangements The dissolution of Parliament sets the complicated election machinery in motion. Essentially, it consists of a board headed by the Chief Electoral Officer in Ottawa and a chief returning officer for each constituency. Each chief returning officer is responsible for conducting the election in his constituency.

As insurance against being caught unprepared, the Chief Electoral Officer starts to get ready for a new election as soon as the last one is over. A general election requires the production of several tons of paper material, such as background papers, manuals of instruction and forms of many kinds.

When the date is set, appropriate quantities of these materials are shipped to the constituencies. Returning officers complete plans for the recording of the votes cast in their areas, set up polling divisions and polling stations, assign enumerators to compile lists of eligible voters, and appoint deputy returning officers. The voter lists are posted in public places so that anyone may check them for accuracy and call for a revision if names have been wrongly omitted or wrongly included.

The independence of the Chief Electoral Officer is ensured by the fact that he is nominated by the House of Commons and not by the Cabinet, as are most public servants of similar rank. His salary is set by law and not by Order-in-Council. Finally, he is responsible to the Commons, and not to the Government, and can be removed only for cause, in the same way as a Judge of the Supreme Court of Canada.

The voters Every Canadian citizen 18 years of age or over has the right to vote. In addition, until June 26, 1975, British subjects who are not Canadian citizens may vote in federal elections provided they have been residing in Canada continuously since June 25, 1967, and were at least 20 years old on that date.