
Chapter 2:

NAVIGATING THE CANADIAN GOVERNMENT

You can empower your nonprofit to engage with the Federal Government by knowing more about the types of decisions it makes, and the services and programs it provides. Being aware of the appropriate avenues to address policy concerns is one of the first steps towards effective advocacy and engagement for your nonprofit. This knowledge can elevate your advocacy efforts by ensuring the actors targeted are well positioned to listen, consult, and provide actionable solutions to your concerns.

The Federal Government is responsible for creating legislation in areas that affect the entire nation. There are three branches within the federal government: **the executive, legislative, and judicial**. The executive branch consists of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, including the Public Service that supports the government in developing, implementing and enforcing policies. The legislative branch of government consists of the Senate and the House of Commons. The judicial branch is composed of courts that interpret laws. Each branch serves a different role in policy and decision-making, approving relevant legislation, and providing programs and services to citizens.

The Executive Branch

Canada is a constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary government meaning that the Queen (or King) is the formal Head of State, which is a largely symbolic role. The Queen is represented by the Governor General, who is appointed by the Queen on the Prime Minister's advice. This appointment is for a term of five years and can be renewed. The Governor General's duties include summoning, opening and ending sessions of parliament, reading the Speech from the Throne, giving Royal Assent to bills, signing state documents, and dissolving Parliament before elections. The Prime Minister is the Head of Government, meaning that the elected governing party makes decisions on behalf of Canadians.⁸

The Prime Minister, along with the Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament, decide on policies, and legislation in the areas of national defence, foreign affairs, employment insurance, banking, federal taxes, the post office, fisheries, transport, Indigenous lands and rights, and criminal law.

The Cabinet

Cabinet Ministers act as advisors for the Prime Minister in different departments or ministries. They are selected from among elected members of the governing party by the Prime Minister.

New laws are advanced by the Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers and are introduced as bills in the House of Commons. Details of proposed bills are debated and amended by House Committees. They are then voted on in the House of Commons and sent to the Senate thereafter for approval.

Cabinet Ministers, along with the Prime Minister, are collectively responsible for federal government policy. The size of the Cabinet is based on the number of departments the Prime Minister decides upon. There are departments for the environment, Canadian heritage, foreign affairs, justice, immigration, transport, public works, finance, Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and national defence and Canadian armed forces, among others.

The Legislative Branch

The Canadian Parliament is split into two chambers; the House of Commons and the Senate. The legislative branch is responsible for debating, amending, and approving proposed legislation and policies.

The House of Commons

The House of Commons (the "House" or "lower house") currently has 338 elected members, or Members of Parliament (MPs), who often belong to political parties. MPs belonging to one political party are known as that party's "caucus" in the House. Members of the same caucus usually vote together.⁹ The House is the lawmaking body in Parliament where there are various debates and discussions between the governing party, the Official Opposition, and other parties and MPs.

Every four years, MPs are elected in a general election. They represent 338 different electoral districts, also known as constituencies or ridings, across Canada. The larger provinces have more elected members than smaller provinces because of the principle of representation by population (rep-by-pop).¹⁰ MPs are responsible for reviewing and debating bills that affect the country, representing their riding by raising issues of importance, taking part in the daily question period, providing statements about various events, and making recommendations for public policy.

DISTRIBUTION OF HOUSE OF COMMONS SEATS			
NUMBER OF SEATS BY PROVINCE/TERRITORY			
Ontario	121	New Brunswick	10
Quebec	78	Newfoundland and Labrador	7
British Columbia	42	Prince Edward Island	4
Alberta	34	Northwest Territories	1
Manitoba	14	Nunavut	1
Saskatchewan	14	Yukon	1
Nova Scotia	11	TOTAL SEATS	338

Source: Parliament of Canada¹¹

The Legislative Branch - Continued

The Senate

The Senate, or “upper house” consists of 105 members who are appointed by the Prime Minister. Before a bill can become law, it must be passed by the Senate. Senators study, amend, and either reject or approve bills passed by the House.

Although Senators are not elected, there are particular **assessment criteria** in place for eligibility. Senators come from various professional, ethnic, socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to represent minority groups. Additionally, appointments are designed to represent the different regions of Canada to balance the power of the House of Commons by appointing Senators to represent regions with small populations that do not have strength-by-numbers in the House of Commons.¹²

The current government introduced a system to appoint independent Senators named by a nonpartisan review panel. Of the sitting senators, 40 are members of the **Independent Senators Group**, 19 are members of the Conservative Party of Canada, 12 are members of the Canadian Senators Group, 11 are members of the Progressive Senators Group, 13 are non-affiliated, and ten seats are currently vacant.¹³

DISTRIBUTION OF SENATE SEATS			
NUMBER OF SEATS BY PROVINCE/TERRITORY			
Ontario	24	Saskatchewan	6
Quebec	24	Newfoundland and Labrador	6
New Brunswick	10	Prince Edward Island	4
Nova Scotia	10	Northwest Territories	1
Alberta	6	Nunavut	1
British Columbia	6	Yukon	1
Manitoba	6	TOTAL SEATS	105

Source: Parliament of Canada¹⁴

The Judicial Branch

The judicial branch consists of the courts across Canada including federal and provincial courts. There are different levels of courts including: Supreme Court of Canada, the Federal Court of Appeal, provincial and territorial courts of appeal, and provincial and territorial courts (lower courts).¹⁵ Each level has authority over specific types of cases.

The courts are comprised of judges who are responsible to interpret and apply the law in various cases. Judges are appointed by either the provincial government (provincial court judges) or by the federal government (federal judges, appeals court judges, and Supreme Court judges).¹⁶ The premise of the courts is its impartiality, which essentially derives from its independence from the executive and legislative branches.

The Public Service

The Public Service of Canada is the country’s single largest employer consisting of over 280,000 employees all over Canada; it is divided into various administrative units such as departments, agencies, commissions, and other federal organizations. The Prime Minister and Cabinet Ministers oversee these departments as part of the executive branch of government.

Public servants perform policy, legal, and administrative duties needed to deliver programs and services to Canadians. They are non-partisan, meaning they do not represent a political party. These are not elected positions; rather, public servants are professional administrators and continue in their roles even when elected governments change. These positions are hired from within the Public Service, or through external processes open to the public.

The Electoral Process

Federal elections occur every four years. They are formally announced by the Governor General, who by the advice of the Prime Minister, dissolves the current Parliament for an election.

Canada has a representative government, with candidates for office contesting election in separate electoral districts (aka constituencies or ridings). These candidates are generally affiliated with a political party. Canada follows the first-past-the-post electoral system for all federal elections. Within this system, candidates who get the most votes become the winning candidate in that electoral district. The winning candidates – MPs – are given a seat in parliament and act as the representative for their electoral district. The party with the most members is generally recognized as the new government, and the leader of the party becomes the Prime Minister. In the event of a minority government, when no party wins a majority of seats, the leader of a party that commands the confidence of the House* is given a chance to govern.¹⁷

The Prime Minister chooses members of his party to form a ministry, or Cabinet. Cabinet Ministers are MPs who oversee the various government departments in the executive branch of government, such as finance, foreign relations, or healthcare (see section on the Cabinet).

The party with the second most seats in the House of Commons is generally called the Official Opposition. The Official Opposition acts as a watchdog and holds the governing party accountable for its policies and actions. The Leader of the Opposition appoints a shadow cabinet (or critics) from their party to critique the government of the day.¹⁸

Majority governments are formed when a political party wins most of the seats in the House. Minority governments are formed when no political party wins the most seats in the House.

* The Prime Minister and Cabinet are responsible to have consent and approval, “confidence” of a majority of the Members of House of Common. If the Prime Minister does not have the confidence of the House, they must provide their resignation to the Governor General.

Relationship Between Nonprofits and the Canadian Government

The Federal Government, like all levels of government, is intrinsically linked to nonprofits. It provides resources and support to nonprofits that help them to effectively accomplish their mission and initiatives, examples of this include:

- Providing programs and services that support communities.
- Providing grants, awards and other types of funding models.
- Leading key research and innovation initiatives.
- Partnering on educational and awareness campaigns.
- Providing a provincial platform to share ideas and perspectives.

Nonprofits should make efforts to build and establish relationships with public servants in the federal government. Fostering these relationships allows for open communication and can streamline the sharing of information. Furthermore, public service employees are not elected officials, so even if the government changes through an election, nonprofits may continue to benefit from the relationships that have been built with public servants.

It is important to remember that nonprofits are free to engage with MPs, cabinet ministers, and public servants. However, there are certain rules in place, for charities in particular, and the next chapter, *Rules of Engagement*, will discuss the rules for nonprofit advocacy.

Three Levels of Government: Who Does What?

Understanding the different levels of government and strategically addressing concerns to the right level, will go a long way to ensure your nonprofit achieves its advocacy goals.

To clarify these roles, the chart to the right lays out the high-level responsibilities of each level of government. Note that some responsibilities, such as environmental management, are the responsibility of more than one level of government.

[CLICK TO DOWNLOAD
'THREE LEVELS OF GOVERNMENT: WHO DOES WHAT?'](#)

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT addresses the needs of all Canadians, examples including:

- Aboriginal Laws and Rights (overlaps with provincial government)
- Canadian Pension Plan and Old Age Security
- Employment Insurance Benefits
- Income Tax Act
- Criminal Law
- Immigration Policies (overlaps with provincial government)

THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT places its primary concern on the needs of Albertans, examples including:

- Education and Training
- Health Programs, Services and Regulations
- Family and Social Services
- Employment and Labour Standards

THE MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT aims to handle issues facing citizens living within defined municipalities and local communities, examples including:

- Affordable Housing (overlaps with federal government)
- Community and Youth Services
- Public Transportation and Parking Bylaws
- Libraries, Parks and Public Spaces
- Waste and Water Management

References

- ¹ Gibbins, Roger. (2016). The Moral Imperative for Policy Advocacy. <https://thephilanthropist.ca/2016/02/the-moral-imperative-for-policy-advocacy/>
- ² Statistics Canada. (2019). Non-profit institutions and volunteering: Economic contribution, 2007 to 2017. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190305/dq190305a-eng.htm>
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Government of Alberta. (2018). Open Data: Alberta Nonprofit Listings. <https://open.alberta.ca/opendata/alberta-non-profit-listing>
- ⁵ Statistics Canada. (2019). Non-profit institutions and volunteering: Economic contribution, 2007 to 2017. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/190305/dq190305a-eng.htm>
- ⁶ Alberta Non-profit/Voluntary Sector Initiative. (2018). Profiling the Nonprofit/Voluntary Sector in Alberta. <https://open.alberta.ca/dataset/99071990-cfbc-4409-9ca5-a25292582f2a/resource/1a736968-dfdb-4222-a937-a7de0c07ec0b/download/profiling-the-nonprofit-voluntary-sector-in-alberta-anvsi.pdf>
- ⁷ CCVO. (2014). Alberta Nonprofit Sector Fact Sheet. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aef5b46cef3728571e6c46c/t/5b31ad168a922d9284bf5dce/1529982247429/ABNPSectorFactSheet_1pager.pdf
- ⁸ Parliament of Canada. (2011). Guide to the Canadian House of Commons. <https://lop.parl.ca/about/parliament/guidetohoc/index-e.htm>
- ⁹ Parliament of Canada. (2017). Compendium of Procedure – Parliamentary Framework. https://www.ourcommons.ca/About/Compendium/ParliamentaryFramework/c_g_parliamentaryframework-e.htm
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Parliament of Canada. (2011). Guide to the Canadian House of Commons. <https://lop.parl.ca/about/parliament/guidetohoc/index-e.htm>
- ¹² Parliament of Canada. (2017). Compendium of Procedure – Senate of Canada. https://www.ourcommons.ca/About/Compendium/ParliamentaryFramework/c_d_senatecanada-e.htm
- ¹³ Parliament of Canada. (2019). Senate of Canada – Senators. <https://sencanada.ca/en/senators/#sch>
- ¹⁴ Parliament of Canada. (2011). Guide to the Canadian House of Commons. <https://lop.parl.ca/about/parliament/guidetohoc/index-e.htm>
- ¹⁵ The Canadian Encyclopedia. (2018). Court Systems of Canada. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/courts-of-law>
- ¹⁶ The Canadian Encyclopedia. (2017). Judiciary in Canada. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/judiciary>
- ¹⁷ Parliament of Canada. (2017). Parliamentary Framework – Compendium of Procedure. https://www.ourcommons.ca/About/Compendium/ParliamentaryFramework/c_g_parliamentaryframework-e.htm
- ¹⁸ Canada Guide. (2019). The Canadian Parliamentary System. <http://www.thecanadaguide.com/government/parliament/>
- ¹⁹ Ontario Nonprofit Network. (2018). Election Toolkit: A Guide for Nonprofits to Meaningfully Engage in Elections. <https://theonn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Election-Toolkit-Jan-2018.pdf>
- ²⁰ Government of Canada. (2019). Public Policy Dialogue and Development Activities by Charities. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/policies-guidance/public-policy-dialogue-development-activities.html>
- ²¹ Nonprofit Vote. (2018). Nonprofits, Voting & Elections: A Guide to Nonpartisan Voter Engagement. <https://www.nonprofitvote.org/nonprofits-voting-elections-online/>
- ²² Government of Canada. (2019). Public Policy Dialogue and Development Activities by Charities. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/policies-guidance/public-policy-dialogue-development-activities.html>
- ²³ Government of Canada. (2019). Guidelines for registering a charity: Meeting the public benefit test. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/policies-guidance/policy-statement-024-guidelines-registering-a-charity-meeting-public-benefit-test.html>
- ²⁴ Government of Canada. (2019). Public Policy Dialogue and Development Activities by Charities. <https://www.canada.ca/en/revenue-agency/services/charities-giving/charities/policies-guidance/public-policy-dialogue-development-activities.html>
- ²⁵ Department of Finance Canada. (2018). Explanatory Notes Relating to the Income Tax Act and to Other Legislation. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&dir=tra/fin/thir/tp03&document=index&lang=e>
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Ibid.
- ²⁸ Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying in Canada. (2019). A Significant Part of Duties (“The 20% Rule”) <https://lobbycanada.gc.ca/eic/site/012.nsf/eng/00115.html>
- ²⁹ Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying in Canada. (2019). Frequently Asked Questions. <https://lobbycanada.gc.ca/eic/site/012.nsf/eng/00884.html>
- ³⁰ Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying in Canada. (2019). Applicability of the Lobbying Act to Grass-roots Communications. <https://lobbycanada.gc.ca/eic/site/012.nsf/eng/00874.html>
- ³¹ Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying in Canada. (2019). Are You Required to Register in the Federal Registry of Lobbyists? <https://lobbycanada.gc.ca/en/registration-and-compliance/are-you-required-to-register-in-the-federal-registry-of-lobbyists/>
- ³² Elections Canada. (2019). Third Party Expenses Limits. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&document=index&dir=thi/limits&lang=e>
- ³³ Elections Canada. (2019). Questions and Answers for Third Parties. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&dir=thi&document=backgrounder&lang=e>
- ³⁴ Elections Canada. (2019). Registering as a Third Party. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&dir=tra/fin/thir/tp03&document=index&lang=e>
- ³⁵ Elections Canada. (2019). Political Financing Handbook for Third Parties, Financial Agents and Auditors. <https://www.elections.ca/content.aspx?section=pol&document=index&dir=thi/ec20227&lang=e>
- ³⁶ CCVO. (2018). Lighting the Way: The State of the Alberta Nonprofit Sector 2018. <https://www.calgarycvo.org/state-of-the-alberta-nonprofit-sector>
- ³⁷ Marketing Science Institute. (2015). The Power of Sensory Marketing in Food Ads. <http://www.msi.org/articles/the-power-of-sensory-marketing-in-food-ads/>
- ³⁸ Christiano, A. & Neimand, A. (2018). The Science of What Makes People Care. Stanford Social Innovation Review 16, no.4: 2-9.