



# The Conscription Crisis

## Learning objective

- Students will study the origins of the conscription debate and the effect it had on Canadian politics and society.

## Time required

50-60 minutes

## Grades

7-12

## Materials

- tiled map: *A Nation Takes Shape*
- red and blue markers to show election results (12 large blue, 33 small blue, 6 large red, 22 small red) (Appendix 9)
- election results
- coloured blocks or chips
- biographies for mock election (Appendix 9)

## Set-up

Print and assemble the tiled map. Print the short biographies provided and cut them into separate cards. Make sure to adhere to the ratios suggested (soldiers, farmers, francophones, anglophones, British-born).

## Links to Canadian National Standards for Geography

### Essential element 2:

#### Places and regions

- factors that influence people's perception of places and regions
- how culture affects places and regions
- physical and human processes shape places and regions
- political and historical characteristics of regions

### Essential element 4:

#### Human systems

- population density, distribution and growth rates
- types and patterns of human settlement

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## Introduction

Ask all male students to stand up. Next, tell them that they are going to war, they do not have a choice, and they must prepare or be labelled a traitor. Ask students how they feel and what their reaction would be if this really happened.

As a class, define conscription – compulsory service in the armed forces. Point out that after the enormous losses at Vimy Ridge, casualties were far higher than enlistments, and Canada was going to face a serious shortage of soldiers if more troops weren't quickly assembled. This led to a divisive debate, whose consequences are still seen in Canadian politics.

Divide the class into two sides, for and against conscription and hold a debate. Allow time for each group to prepare. As the teacher, moderate the debate and highlight themes like growing patriotism, population distribution (men leaving from cities versus small towns), the role of women, etc.

## Development

Explain that in 1917, Canada was faced with a decision: support the current Unionist government and conscription or support the Liberal opposition party and no conscription. Ask students their opinion on conscription and if their opinion would change if the war's purpose was to protect innocent people from harm. Have students explain how they would be able to tell if they were the "good guys"? Explain that the government decided to allow women to vote, but the right was limited to war widows, women serving overseas and women with family serving overseas. Ask students why they think the government made the decision to give some women the right to vote.

Point out that many groups in Canada had different opinions on the war. Number students one through eight, and explain that they are all about to take on the identity of a Canadian in 1917. They will be one of the following:

1. A soldier posted overseas
2. A farmer in Western Canada
3. An English-speaking Canadian man born in Canada
4. An English-speaking Canadian woman born in Canada
5. A French-speaking Canadian man born in Canada
6. A French-speaking Canadian woman born in Canada
7. A British-born person living in Canada
8. An English-speaking Canadian whose parents disagree about the vote

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**Essential element 6:****The uses of geography**

- influence of geographical features on the evolution of significant historic events and movements

Make sure to post clearly on the board that Unionists are **pro-conscription**, while Liberals are **anti-conscription**. Follow the guideline posted at the top of the biography sheet for the distribution of roles. Cut out and distribute the biographies for mock election cards provided in this resource package. Give students time to decide on their vote and then ask them to come up to the front to hand you their secret ballot. After all ballots are in, tally the results and inform the class whom they have elected. Quickly poll them to see how many would have voted differently if it was their own decision and not based on their assigned biography. Next, have them predict the election results (provided) from 1917 out of 235 total seats.

## Conclusion

Province by province, reveal the results and use coloured blocks or chips to highlight them on the tiled map (for dramatic effect, reveal Ontario second last and Quebec last). Ask students if they are surprised by this result and what they can now infer about French and English Canada in 1917. By the end of the war, less than half of the roughly 100,000 conscripted soldiers had actually gone overseas, and less than half of them had been deployed to the front lines.

Discuss whether they think conscription was worth the political damage it caused and how they feel about the fact that Vimy Ridge, the battle that is seen by many as the birth of Canada, actually led to a bitter and lasting divide within the country.

## Extend your geographic thinking

Have students research the latest federal election results by province and territory and connect their findings with the results from 1917. Discuss any patterns or trends they see.

	BC	AB	SK	MB	ON	QC	NB	NS	PEI	YK	
<b>UNIONISTS</b>	13	11	16	14	74	3	7	12	2	1	153
<b>LIBERALS</b>	0	1	0	1	8	62	4	4	2	0	82

235

Divide students into eight groups and give each a biography. For additional students, print out extra English-Canadian and French-Canadian biographies and distribute them at a ratio of two English to one French biography. These cards are also to be used as their ballots for the vote.



Conscription



### Soldier

- You are currently posted on the front lines.
- There are rumours that enlistments have plummeted in Canada and reinforcements may be delayed by weeks or months.
- Your close friend was wounded at Vimy Ridge.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### Farmer in Saskatchewan

- You were born in Lumsden, Sask.
- Many of the boys in your town volunteered for the war, so there is a shortage of able-bodied men to work on your farm.
- You have a cousin from Ontario who is currently fighting in France.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### English-Canadian Man

- You were born in Hamilton.
- Your father was born in England, but moved to Canada at a young age.
- There are signs all over town asking men to do their part for the war, and some of your friends have already enlisted.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### English-Canadian Woman

- You were born in Sydney, N.S.
- The extra demand for coal in the war has been a boon for your town's economy, and there are plenty of jobs for everyone.
- Your eldest son is fighting in France, so you are allowed to vote.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### French-Canadian Man

- You were born just outside Montreal.
- Your family has been in Canada for several generations.
- You have five children and work on a dairy farm along the St. Lawrence River.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### French-Canadian Woman

- You were born and live in Quebec City.
- Your brother from Toronto enlisted in 1914 and is still in France, so you are allowed to vote.
- Your husband works in a factory, and you have three young children at home.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### British-born Canadian Man

- You were born in London, England, and moved to Toronto at the age of 12 with your parents.
- You recently received a letter from your uncle who is fighting in France telling you how proud he is to be doing his part for his home country.
- You have no wife or children.

Unionist       Liberal

Conscription



### English-Canadian Man

- You were born in Winnipeg.
- You work at the rail yard as a labourer.
- Your parents disagree about the vote. Your father thinks all men should fight, but your mother is afraid you will be conscripted.

Unionist       Liberal