

Online Citizen Consultation and Engagement in Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Like other western liberal democracies, Canada has witnessed the erosion of political participation and civic engagement on the part of its citizens. Recent studies of Canadian democracy have revealed numerous symptoms of malaise, including declines in voter turnout, participation in traditional political institutions, civic literacy, and trust in government (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte, & Nadeau, 2004; Nevitte, 1996). Governments at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels have launched numerous democratic reform initiatives in response. Along with proposals for electoral and parliamentary system reform, governments in Canada have responded with new *citizen consultation* initiatives designed to increase public participation in the policymaking process. Incorporating the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) into these initiatives, such as online citizen consultation tools, has become a common method used to engage Canadians in the policymaking process. A gradual shift in the language and practice of citizen involvement in the policymaking process has also been taking place, one in which citizen consultation is being complemented by richer and more sustained forms of *citizen engagement*. This chapter examines the political context and conceptual underpinnings of online citizen consultation and engagement in federal policymaking in Canada, reviews a number of recent examples, and assesses their outcomes in light of their potential to overcome the democratic malaise currently ailing Canada's political system.

BACKGROUND

Citizen consultation has been an increasingly common feature of the policymaking scene in Canada since the 1960s. In the early 1990s, however, following popular repudiation of two major constitutional agreements negotiated by political elites, it became clear that Canadian citizens' demands for more meaningful opportunities to

participate in policymaking were increasing, even as they were becoming alienated from traditional avenues and institutions of participation such as political parties and elections. Nevitte (1996) suggests that these demands stem, in part, from the democratization of higher education in the post-WWII period, as a result of which Canadian citizens have become less deferential and more "cognitively mobile," thus narrowing the knowledge-skill gap between citizens and political elites. New ICTs, including the Internet, have also facilitated citizens' access to policy-relevant information and news. Canadians increasingly believe that they are knowledgeable about national issues, and they are becoming less willing to leave policymaking and governing up to public officials whom they may not trust. The federal government responded in the late 1990s by introducing new mechanisms for citizen input into a number of areas, including social policy, health care, and rural issues (Patten, 2001; Phillips & Orsini, 2002).

Phillips and Orsini (2002) have described a gradual shift in the federal government's approach to involving citizens in the policymaking process. In the 1960s, governments began to hold *citizen consultations*—hearings, town halls, and so forth—as a way to involve citizens in the policy process outside of elections. Such consultations tended, however, to be state-centered, with government framing the issues and dictating agendas. The purpose of such consultations was typically to obtain information from citizens and to notify them of pending government action. Unable to influence agendas and uncertain about the influence gained through such exercises, citizens became suspicious of and impatient with such forms of consultation over time.

The concept of *citizen engagement* has emerged in the last half decade in Canada as governments have pondered newer, more meaningful models of citizen involvement. Phillips and Orsini (2002) define citizen engagement as involving "interactive and iterative processes of deliberation among citizens (and sometimes organizations) and between citizens and government of-

ficials with the purpose of contributing meaningfully to specific public policy decisions in a transparent and accountable way” (p. 3). Citizen engagement is intended to be less state-centered than traditional consultation by embodying both government- and citizen-convened involvement processes. More importantly, Phillips and Orsini (2002) stress,

it emphasizes the importance of genuine two-way dialogue among citizens, and between citizens and governments [...] Citizen engagement would thus exclude many instances of public consultation because the latter does not produce a genuine dialogue, nor does it give citizens much real influence over policy outcomes. (p. 3-4, emphasis added)

Citizen engagement is closely related to the theory of *deliberative democracy*, as elaborated by political theorists like Jurgen Habermas and James Fishkin, and as implemented in *deliberative dialogue* exercises by governments and third-party organizations (Fishkin, 1991). Deliberative dialogues bring together diverse groups of citizens to engage with experts, policymakers, and each other on major public policy issues of the day. In face-to-face deliberative dialogues, citizens “consider relevant facts and values from different points of view, work together to think critically about options and expand their perspectives, views, and understandings.” (MacKinnon, 2004, p. 4). Deliberative dialogues show more potential than traditional consultation to stimulate citizen engagement (Saxena, 2003).

The Government of Canada’s interest in increasing citizen consultation has also been driven by developments in public sector uses of new ICTs, especially as the concept and practice of *e-government* has achieved acceptance. In the late 1990s, new ICTs were embraced by Canadian parliamentarians and public servants as means to improve service delivery and to communicate and consult with the public and organized interest groups (Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002; Malloy, 2004; Richard, 1999). In addition to the anticipated administrative and service delivery benefits, the government portrayed its *Government Online* (GOL) initiative as offering an antidote to the civic malaise gripping the country. In terms of providing information to citizens and offering them more access to policymakers and the policymaking process, the federal government has achieved some impressive results thus far. A vast quantity of online information has been put at the disposal of Canadian citizens, who have in turn embraced the effort. The Canada Site (<http://www.canada.gc.ca>), the government of Canada’s main Internet portal, provides access to over 450 federal Web sites and millions of pages of documents and information on government programs and services, and was

visited by roughly 16 million unique users in 2003 (Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2004a). The Parliament of Canada maintains a legislative Web site (<http://www.parl.gc.ca>) that allows citizens to monitor the status of bills and the work of the various legislative committees of the House of Commons and the Senate. Individual parliamentarians have begun to establish a significant Internet presence as well, with 58% operating Web sites, many of which offer interactive tools for constituents to communicate with Members of Parliament via online feedback forms and surveys (Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002).

ONLINE CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA: POLICY AND PRACTICE

As in many other jurisdictions, the Canadian government’s use of the Internet and related technologies to engage and consult with citizens is at the developmental stage, with most projects being undertaken on a pilot or experimental basis. Nevertheless, in addition to using the Internet to provide citizens with information, the federal government has begun to use a variety of online tools to solicit policy feedback from citizens and, in some cases, to provide opportunities for citizens to engage interactively with officials, politicians and each other (Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2004b). The Privy Council Office (PCO) is the government agency responsible for online consultations. The PCO has prepared guidelines for online consultation and engagement. Some of the advantages of online consultations identified by the PCO include the ability to reach traditionally inactive portions of the population such as rural communities and youth, and the more flexible mechanisms of participation that the Internet offers busy Canadians. While government-wide policy and practice on using the Internet for public consultations remains elusive, various departments and agencies have used a number of online tools to solicit and gauge public opinion and reaction to policy initiatives. Online consultation tools currently in use by federal departments include e-mail, online surveys, interactive workbooks, discussion forums, and content management systems. In 2003, the Department of Canadian Heritage, along with the PCO, launched a Web site entitled “Consulting Canadians” (<http://www.consultingcanadians.gc.ca>). The site is a consultation portal where citizens can find structured lists of consultation exercises taking place (on and off-line) across the country.

Online consultations in Canada can be classified according to the distinction between *online feedback* and *online discussion* (Public Works and Government Ser-

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