

# E-Participation and Canadian Parliamentarians

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, the public policies of many countries have emphasized the need for greater citizen participation in decision-making, and governments have been adopting e-government strategies as a means of not only improving service delivery, but also engaging society and revitalizing democracy. Indeed, many political leaders have been advancing the democratic potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example, has stated: “I believe that the information society can revitalize our democracy...innovative electronic media is pioneering new ways of involving people of all ages and backgrounds in citizenship through new Internet and digital technology ... that can only strengthen democracy” (Hansard Society, 2004). Similarly, former United States President Bill Clinton stated that ICTs would “give the American people the Information Age that they deserve—to cut red tape, improve the responsiveness of government toward citizens, and expand opportunities for democratic participation” (Prins, 2001, p. 79). In Canada, former Prime Minister Paul Martin also argued, along the same vein, that people need to be brought into the decision-making process if the country is to have the kind of future that it needs, indicating that ICTs are a useful means of achieving this goal (Speech to the 2003 Crossing Boundaries Conference, Ottawa Canada).

## BACKGROUND

At the same time as governments have been praising the idea that ICTs can serve as the necessary tool for allowing the public a greater voice in governing, and for strengthening democracy, there has been a proliferation in the literature making similar arguments. Broadly speaking, this school of thought can be referred to as Utopian. For those adhering to this approach, ICTs provide “solutions to problems of space, population, access, and participation” (Saco, 2002, p. xvi). Some go as far as stating that ICTs will empower citizens to the point where existing structures of representative government are rendered obsolete (Naisbitt, 1982). Others take a more moderate approach, pointing to the way that society can use ICTs

to mobilize and to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of various campaigns. This use of technology has been fittingly termed “cyber-activism” by some scholars (Dyer-Witheford, 1999). Others take a different approach, still arguing that the technology constitutes a means for governments to re-engage those who have been disengaged from public affairs (Coleman, 2001). In this sense, ICTs are seen as allowing for the possibility of a new public space—a sort of electronic agora—where citizens serve as an active participant in governing (Centre for Collaborative Government, 2002).

Contrary to the Utopians, is the approach offered by the Dystopians. This group does not agree that ICTs will fulfill the democratizing role outlined by the Utopians. Rather, they argue the technology has no impact on citizen engagement and it is “politics as usual” (Margolis & Resnick, 2000). Some go further arguing that ICTs are having a negative impact on participation and democracy as a result of its speed and inequities related to access (Barber, 2001; Taylor & Saarinen, 1996).

## E-PARTICIPATION OR POLITICS AS USUAL?

The literature on this subject summarizes the various uses of ICTs and their positive and negative ramifications; however, it tends to make two vital omissions. First, much of the literature especially that which takes a “cyber-activist” approach, focuses on the use of ICTs by society. In terms of participation, it details the use of ICTs as a tool for citizens to participate in governing, but most often neglects to examine how government representatives respond to the electronic efforts of society (for an exception see Moynihan, 2003). Second, much of the literature makes assertions concerning the impact of ICTs on participation and democracy without clearly defining democracy, or what increased participation would require (Barber, 2001). Drawing on theories of participatory democracy, the Utopian-Dystopian dichotomy found in the literature, and looking at the situation in Canadian federal politics, this chapter attempts to begin addressing these gaps and to offer further insight into the impact of ICTs on citizen participation and democracy. Canada serves as an interesting case to consider as less is known about how

its parliamentarians are using ICTs to engage its citizens (Coleman, 2001, for example, has looked extensively at the British situation and authors such as Margolis & Resnick, 2000 have explored the American situation). This study also has the potential to provide for future comparative analysis and it identifies many barriers to e-participation to be considered.

An exploration of the literature on participatory democracy and models of e-democracy allows one to tease out four criteria that should be fulfilled before one can say that ICTs are enhancing participation and democracy (Chadwick & May, 2003; Fishkin, 1991, 1995; Laudon, 1977; Pateman, 1970). This is useful as it provides a context for thinking about and evaluating e-participation. The four criteria are:

1. Information/education
2. Avenue for participation/consultation
3. Deliberation
4. Evidence that views are heard

Each criterion will be discussed briefly, in turn, along with the results of an empirical examination of the Canadian situation. The empirical study is modeled on work done by Andrew Chadwick and Christopher May and a dataset compiled by the Cyberspace Policy Research Group (CyPRG). It employs a multi-disciplinary approach and studies the content of the Web sites of Canadian Members of Parliament (MPs). At the time this study was conducted 200 of the 299 sitting MPs had Web sites. It also draws on interviews that were conducted with sixty Members of Canada's 37<sup>th</sup> Parliament concerning their use of ICTs, how they respond to Canadians who seek to participate in governance electronically, and some of the barriers they felt were preventing them from fully engaging in e-participation.

### **Information/Education**

Democratic theorists place a great deal of importance on information and education. Access to good and up-to-date information is useful not only for helping people come to informed decisions during election periods, but it is also necessary to help them participate, on an ongoing basis, in matters of governance. Indeed, the lack of information and knowledge about policy issues is often cited as a reason for rejecting greater participation: "Perhaps the most commonly advanced reason for rejecting direct democracy via the Internet...is that citizens are poorly informed about public issues much of the time...what sense does it make to ask citizens what government policy should be on a matter about which the majority of the people know either little or nothing" (Brooks, 2000, p. 12). The type and sources of information are also important to

consider. An environment which fosters participation and the third condition outlined here—deliberation—requires that diverse opinions and a variety of information be made readily available to the public. While the Internet does offer a great deal of information from a variety of sources (not all credible), it can be difficult to navigate and to evaluate. If government officials truly wanted to harness the democratic potential of ICTs then one can speculate that government and individual MPs' Web sites, should contain information which would help citizens become aware of various issues and processes of government.

A survey of Canadian MPs' Web sites indicated that this condition is being fulfilled fairly well. In total, 160 of the MPs offered information and links to federal government services and programs. Conversely, only 119 of the MPs offered information or links to sources beyond the federal government. Surprisingly, only seven MPs offered information regarding the issues and legislation being considered by Parliament; however, most did provide hyper-links to the main Canadian Parliamentary Web site where such information could be found. Many of the MPs interviewed for this study stated that they felt as though they were expected to have an online presence. Most answered that they thought it important to have Web sites so that they could effectively and efficiently share information with their constituents. However, there seemed to be uncertainty over what type of information Canadians would like to find on their MPs' Web sites. As one MP stated, there is a "veil of ignorance" among MPs as to what type of information citizens would find useful or would like to have access to. This MP's admission of such ignorance was interesting as it indicates that perhaps elected representatives put little thought into what Canadians may need information about and, what type of information is required to present to them so that they can make informed decisions when participating in either elections or policy discussions. They are not paying attention to the education and socialization of the public, which as Pateman argued is necessary for participation to flourish.

### **Avenue for Participation/Consultation**

Having information is not a sufficient condition for greater democratic participation. For this to occur, it is obvious that there must be avenues by which citizens can be engaged or consulted. While traditional democratic processes do have some built-in participatory mechanisms, such as committees, or inquiries, these are not always open to all citizens and it is often difficult for individuals to participate. Moreover, it is important to recognize that there are limitations inherent in the traditional methods of engagement. These can include such things as time and money. For many who adhere to a more Utopian approach,

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