

# The Internet and Electronic Democracy in Canada: Reaching the Limits of E-Government and the False Promise of Digital Democracy?<sup>1</sup>

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Do e-government initiatives have the capacity to improve democratic participation? Will attempts to modernize or digitize service delivery and accessibility lead to greater political empowerment? Will it instill a greater sense of political efficacy among Canadian voters? Proponents of the current wave of modernization, especially in relation to the prospects for e-consultation, would answer in the affirmative (Peters and Abud 2009; Perimutter 2008; Kim 2008; Behrouzi 2006b; Courchene 2005; Reddick 2005; West 2005; Caldrow 2004; Gibson 2002). They would assert that information communication technologies (ICTs) have the potential to make government more accountable and transparent—as well as enlarging the scope of political decision making. While there are good reasons to be optimistic, it remains to be seen how state sponsored online initiatives will contribute to a meaningful reconciliation of the existing democratic deficit.

There is a rich and growing literature on the promise of electronic government and digital democracy. In Canada's case, in particular, it appears to have become fashionable to highlight what the federal and provincial governments have accomplished, and then to speculate on how the digitization of public services might ultimately improve democratic intercourse or how it may better facilitate stakeholder-government interactions. Of course, this is not to suggest an absence of critical scholarship on this matter. For example, Veenhof et al (2008), McNutt (2008, 2004), McNutt and Carey (2008), Borins et al (2007), Roy (2008, 2006), and Small (2004) have shed some light on the benefits and shortcomings of e-government, e-enabled policy communities, and e-democracy from a Canadian perspective. Yet, the influence—real or perceived—of ICTs on policy outcomes, civic engagement, and government accountability remains provisional at best. Moreover, compelling evidence of the importance and usefulness of government online initiatives is scarce and even somewhat ambiguous.

Dutil et al (2007), Komito (2005), Kesten (2005) and the OECD (2003a) have raised a number of relevant questions and have expressed some doubts over the relative utility of digital government and e-democracy as well. But here too minor reservations are often tempered by the belief that ICTs can generally have both a profound and positive transformational impact on

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democratic government and governance—provided the ‘right’ platform is developed. The erudite and comprehensive nature of the reports on offer is truly impressive, but they can be judged to be problematic for several reasons. First, e-government and e-democracy are generally appraised in a highly universalized fashion. The OECD (2003b, 2005), for instance, has written extensively on the challenges of establishing and experimenting with digital service delivery systems, but the significance of their findings, at times, is unclear. Indeed, the laconic nature of OECD reports tends to obscure the nuances that shape policy outcomes on a state by state basis.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, much of the OECD’s work on these matters focuses predominantly on the American and/or European experiences. It is important to reiterate that there are significant variations in governance and policy-making structures and practices that need to be explored to better understand how ICTs may or may not affect state-citizen relations or improve government services. Second, while it may be true that ICTs have improved the consultative capacity of highly specialized interest groups (and maybe even some high profile individuals), it is also true that they remain exceedingly instrumental in orientation and are routinely employed to achieve uniquely political ends—such as information distribution (propaganda), enhancing lines communication between lobbyists and public officials, and improving administrative efficiency (Howlett 2009; McNutt 2008; OECD 2005, 2003b; Borins 2004; Norris 2001). Finally, a succinct and expressive critique on the limitations of e-democracy in Canada has yet to materialize. In general, there remains a substantial body of relevant material that has yet to be sufficiently consulted or examined. For instance, as will be shown below, Canadians continue to use the Internet for distinctly apolitical reasons—such as social networking, gaming, and communicating with friends and family. Hence, from a personal usage point of view, the Internet appears to have evolved into a social and commercial tool, rather than an empowering political device.

This article does not deny that ICTs can be used to improve government services and possibly even accountability, but it is probably still too early to declare that they will have a revolutionary impact on democratic politics. In Canada’s case at least, there are good reasons to believe that the political application of information technologies may have already reached its upper limit. Moreover, there is very little evidence—again in a Canadian context—showing that ICTs have significantly improved citizen participation and engagement. Therefore, it will be argued that technological enablers such as the Internet are unlikely to have a transformational impact—beyond what has already been accomplished—on Canada’s political landscape. To be certain, more time and energy needs to be dedicated to addressing Internet usage trends (including the persistent digital divide), the quality of engagement that is expected or envisaged, the factors that contribute to voter apathy, and the extent to which ICTs will alter well entrenched parliamentary and party conventions and executive supremacy.

Granting voters the opportunity to deliberate on key policy issues also needs to be appraised more critically. As California’s and Maine’s recent ballot propositions on same sex civil unions demonstrate, democracy is capable of stalling (morally and ethically) progressive social movements. This is not to assert that Canada is bound to the same fate as California or Maine, but this element of plebiscitarian democracy should be scrutinized more cautiously in light of recent outcomes in the United States and elsewhere.<sup>3</sup>

The following presentation is divided into three broad areas of analysis. Part one defines and examines e-government, e-governance, and e-democracy. It will be shown that the use of digital media, for the purposes of service delivery and information dissemination, has become

an important priority for high-income governments in the OECD. Yet, the 'e-governance revolution' appears to have been initially rationalized on the basis of a cost-savings approach to service delivery rather than any manifest pledge to enhancing citizen-government interaction. As well, part one briefly looks at how advanced communications (especially the Internet) can be used, and are being used in Europe and the United States, to 'engage' and 'empower' voters. Part two surveys Canada's current e-democracy project and some of Ottawa's more successful e-governance programs and initiatives. The final part of this paper focuses on the limits and barriers to more widespread political participation via digital technologies in a Canadian context. A careful review of the evidence shows that the promise of e-democracy is mostly conjectural and that a host of other salient issues need to be addressed before any measurable improvements in civic engagement, transparency, and/or accountability are to be observed.

## **Prospects and Possibilities:**

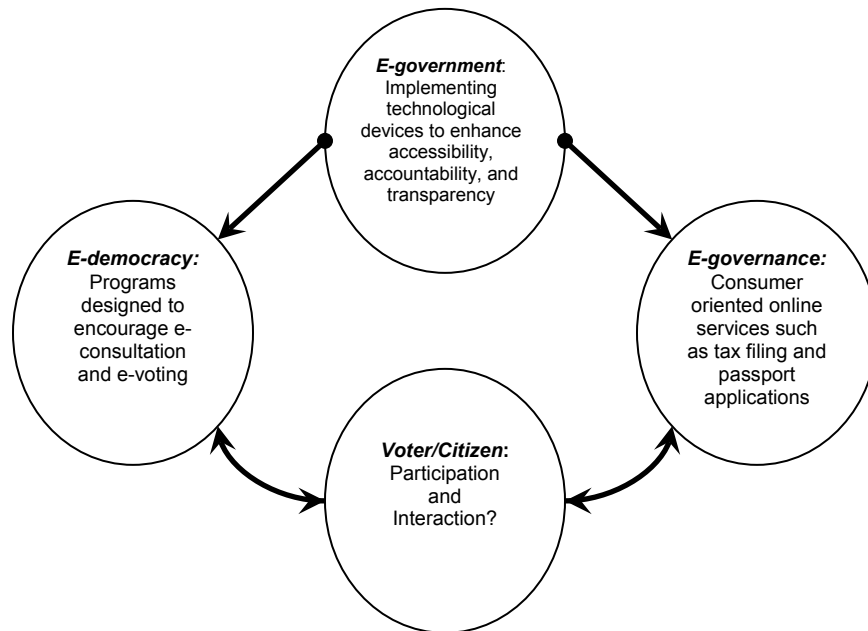
### **What are e-government, e-governance, and e-democracy?**

The terms e-government (or digital government), e-governance, and e-democracy have been used to describe three different, but interconnected, political phenomena. E-government simply refers to the use of ICTs "to improve public access to government and [to] promote the increased participation of individual[s]...in the decision making process" (McNutt 2004:4).<sup>4</sup> In essence, e-government consists of two mutually supportive developments. One focuses on the deployment of communications technologies to improve the overall quality of citizen-centered services and the administrative capacity of state and sub-state entities or agencies. E-governance, then, aims to put government services online in an effort to bring citizens closer to the institutional and organizational structures that oversee policy directives and program delivery.

The more substantive and controversial development, however, involves the use of Internet technologies to augment civic engagement and provide citizens with greater opportunities to contribute to the various stages of the policy cycle. Fundamentally, e-democracy involves the use of digital media to enhance 'active participation in law-making and legislative processes' (Caldow 2003; McNutt and Carey 2008).

While these are useful distinctions, Hanselmann (2001) has suggested that 'Internet government' can also be conceptualized as consisting of a range interrelated activities. The first, *citizen information*, refers to government web-portals (or entry points) that can eliminate the barriers (such as time and space) to a country's governing institutions, public services, and/or political representatives. These access points allow Internet users to review ministry profiles and responsibilities, follow live streams (such as question period proceedings), and examine proposed pieces legislation. 'Following' parties and elected officials on Twitter has now become a popular method of accessing more personalized information as well (Small 2010). Naturally, exposing government operations at this level normalizes transparency and thus (presumably) makes public officials and agencies more accessible.

Figure 1: E-government Conceptual Model



A second area, *citizen-government interaction*, attempts to promote a higher degree of political engagement. Specifically, Web-savvy constituents are encouraged to take advantage of opportunities to e-mail government officeholders—both elected and appointed—or to utilize online tax filing services. ‘Interaction’ can also take the form of participating in electronic surveys or responding to policy proposals. The third component revolves around the idea of *policy-making*. Here, the goal has been to develop ICT infrastructure to better place citizens in a position to influence policy and governance in ways previously unexpected. Indeed, governments in high-income countries have made it a priority to reach out to disengaged citizens by investing heavily in multiple broadcasting mechanisms. As a result, e-consultation programs have emerged as the cornerstone of government policy in this domain (OECD 2005). The final component, *citizen dialogue*, centers on the belief that the Internet will engender more productive civic exchanges and that it has the potential to improve the organizational capacity of ‘issue-oriented’ interest groups (Hanselmann 2001).

On the basis of this sketch, it is clear that the ICTs can be used (and are being used) to transform administrative practices and policy outcomes. Furthermore, as the following section illustrates Canada’s federal and provincial governments have introduced an impressive array of e-government programs—predominantly in the fields of information dissemination and service delivery. Yet, one of the more intriguing themes identified and discussed in the literature is that ICTs, up to this point, have been used primarily to improve administrative efficiency and service delivery networks. The OECD (2005), for example, has identified digital government as one of the key transformative features of public sector modernization. But the use of technology is often presented as a way to improve the competitiveness, management, and efficiency of government and as a way to contain and/or control government spending (Margetts 2006; West 2005).

Perfecting and streamlining the horizontal processes of government departments (such as personnel and financial management) has now evolved into decidedly routine affair. Indeed, in an effort to mimic the structure and efficiency of private enterprise, many high income regimes have pitched ICTs as the most effective way to enhance public services. Hence, one interpretation of ICT inspired public sector reform implies that governments have been motivated more by cost containment considerations, than by any overarching commitment to citizen engagement (McNutt and Carey 2008; Borins 2004; Danziger and Andersen 2002). Of course, ICTs can be transfigured into multifunctional political instruments, but there remains considerable emphasis on administrative efficiency. Hence, the widespread corporatization of Canada's public services can be seen as part of a broader systematic trend that has engulfed most of the OECD's member governments.

However, the digitization of many governments' public service apparatuses does not represent the sum total of the global e-government project. As was mentioned above, some e-democracy related programs (such as e-voting and e-consultative forums) have grown in popularity in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere (Power 2010; Liptrott 2007; Stephens et al 2006; Kahani 2006; Xenakis and Macintosh 2004; Milner 2002). The "Arizona Democrats' decision to integrate Internet voting into their 2000 primary election" process and the United Kingdom's 2002-2003 e-voting pilots are two interesting cases in point (Liptrott 2007; Xenakis and Macintosh 2004; Solop 2001: 289). The European Union's continued efforts to rectify political disengagement (and to shore up a measure of legitimacy) via several web portals is another instance of this now well established trend (Power 2010; Milner 2002: 130-133). Yet, while it might be fair to say that certain aspects of e-democracy have shown some promise, it also seems to have fallen short of expectations. Power (2010), Liptrott (2007), Stephens (2006), and Xenakis and Macintosh (2004) have all expressed serious reservations regarding the efficacy of ICTs when it comes to elections and consultative opportunities. Some of the more consistent concerns identified by these authors include: 1) a lack of political will at the central level of government—and specifically the lack of a formal diffusion strategy for e-voting; 2) a lack of access to an appropriate level of skills training; 3) an inability (or delay), on the part of the institutions of government, to deploy a broader range of ICT platforms (such as blogging and tweeting devices) to better communicate with citizens; 4) persistent security and privacy issues; and 5) a lack of transparency during e-voting pilots. This does not mean that the e-democracy experiment should be abandoned, but the long term success of e-democracy appears to be contingent on a series of corrections that have yet to materialize. At this early stage then, the promise of a qualitative improvement in voter empowerment and democratic processes—resulting from ICTs—remains unconvincing.

## **E-Government in Canada: 'Reshaping the Contours of the Canadian Political Landscape?'**

The federal government has made an extraordinary commitment to integrating communications technologies into several key areas of the country's administrative apparatus. For all intents and purposes, it "has emerged as the digital government policy leader in Canada, establishing an extensive information infrastructure by organizing various integrated service delivery projects across jurisdictions to provide comprehensive information online" (McNutt and Carey 2008: 4). The Government of Canada's (GOL) website, for example, is rich in content and presents users with opportunities to contact MPs, survey publications and reports, and to submit feedback on

the site's design features and utility. In all, it is the principal gateway to government information and online services.

Yet, as has been well documented by McNutt and Carey (2008) Canada's e-government infrastructure consists of more than just a few well maintain information thresholds. The authors actually provide a succinct and well articulated review of how Ottawa has attempted to modernize access to public services, processes, and officials. Hence, a summary of their observations and insights bear some repeating. The most visible and widely acclaimed manifestation of Ottawa's commitment to e-government is audience centered portals (ACPs). ACPs or 'citizen centered portals' are Internet service platforms that can be used by citizens, non-citizens, and Canadian entrepreneurs to access and submit tax return information, patent applications, apply for employment insurance, and/or completed immigration forms (McNutt and Carey 2008). There are approximately 270 service and information oriented sites now listed on the Government of Canada's 'on-line forms and services by topic' gateway (Government of Canada 2010).

The authors also identify e-governance as an important development and convey the view that online activism has had a positive impact on public administration. It is claimed that the federal government has adopted 'collaborative networking technologies' in an effort to better facilitate public sector management and to address the concerns of important societal actors. In all, McNutt and Carey suggest that ICTs "have leveled government communication activity where interagency information sharing and communication are common, and multi-stakeholder collaboration has become the new administrative norm" (2008: 9). One of the more notable examples of this transformation is the use of ICTs to expedite federal and provincial cooperation on health related policy matters (Health Canada 2006). Another relevant example is the administrative and funding structures that have taken root under the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

The final component highlighted by the authors is Ottawa's attempt to institute a more robust set of interactive media. To date, the federal government's e-democracy experiment has consisted mostly of e-consultation initiatives such as feedback links, customer-care appraisal surveys, and direct contact with MPs and MP press officers. Industry Canada's 'Consultation on Canada's Digital Economy' is the most recent incarnation of this phenomenon, but e-consultation initiatives have now become more common (Industry Canada 2010). Prime Minister Harper's 'real time interview on YouTube' on March 11, 2010 is another conspicuous illustration of this trend (YouTube 2010). Curiously, however, it is unclear the extent to which many of these efforts constitute a legitimate form democratic expression or activity. For example, it is not obvious that participating in a government/public 'customer care survey' is anymore empowering than participating in a private/corporate 'customer care survey.' The same is likely true when it comes to contacting MP communications staff. Indeed, how important is the perception of empowerment vis-à-vis the concrete reality of empowerment?

In sum, Ottawa has successfully executed several of its e-government programs. Citizens now have more opportunities to access services and communicate with public official—in 'real time' no less—but does this transformation truly represent a fundamental change in citizen-government relations and the prospects for meaningful engagement? Are citizens actually embracing and responding to this new fangled turn of events or are they simply being reconditioned to accept a modification in government operations and communications? This is

not to suggest that Ottawa's efforts and investments have been in vain. On the contrary, ICT solutions seem to have improved government performance and accessibility in important ways, but it is likely that, in a Canadian context at least, they have now reached their upper limit.

## **The Next Step: The False Promise of Canadian e-Democracy?**

There would seem to be several overlapping problems linked to the promise of e-government in general and e-democracy more specifically (Norris 2001). If one were to uncritically accept the pronouncements of cyber-optimists one might conclude that technology can—and eventually will—relieve the current pattern of civic disengagement taking root in Canada and several other well established democratic states (Dobbin 2010; Milner 2007; Behrouzi, 2006b; Pammatt and LeDuc 2003; Aucoin and Turnbull 2003; Decker 2002). In Canada's case in particular, this belief appears to overlook or underrate the reality of executive predominance, well entrenched parliamentary conventions, the persistent digital divide, and the factors that account for voter apathy. Furthermore, proponents of e-democracy fail to illuminate how technology will fundamentally alter the procedural dimension of ballot casting or how utilizing ICTs, for political purposes, might render voters vulnerable to reactionary propaganda. This section examines these issues in a Canadian context to determine the extent to which advanced telecommunications systems can and will improve democratic intercourse.

Perhaps the most controversial issue, however, is the rather supine nature of Canadian democracy. Indeed, the idea that voters “should have [a] direct and substantive role in making legislative and policy decisions...constitutes the main ideal (and a primary moral component of the idea) of democracy” (Behrouzi, 2006a:2). Yet, there is a well established intellectual tradition that has shown that ‘elites, not masses, govern all societies’—suggesting of course that citizens (primarily in liberal democratic regimes) simply legitimize competing policy agendas (Rothkopf 2008; Domhoff 2002; Dye 2002, 2001, 1978; Bottomore 1993; Putnam 1976; Lasswell and Lerner 1952). Typically, essential matters of public policy are decided in secrecy among a powerful minority of cabinet officials and senior advisors (Martin 2010; White 2005). Elections certainly grant citizens opportunities to evaluate the performance of incumbent governments, but popular preferences are only one determinant to policy outcomes—and really only a secondary determinant (Pomper, 1985).

Here, the insights and observations of Macpherson (1977, 1965) and Wolin (2008) are instructive. Macpherson, for example, reminds us that even in democracies there exists an uneven distribution of power, authority, and influence among society's principal actors and institutions. Furthermore, he claims that most modern democratic states amount to little more than a particular variant of democratic governance. Canada, for instance, resembles the ‘pluralist elitist equilibrium model’ advanced by Macpherson (1977):

“The main stipulation of this model are, first, that democracy is simply a mechanism for choosing and authorizing governments, not a kind of society nor a set of moral ends; and second, that the mechanism consists of a competition between two or more self-chosen sets of politicians (elites), arrayed in political parties, for the votes which will entitle them to rule until the next election. The voters' role is not to decide political issues and then choose representatives who will carry out those decisions: it is rather to choose men [and women] who will do the deciding” (78).

In this conception, voters are presented as political consumers that defer the responsibility of governing to a more 'qualified' host of public officials. This is an alluring proposition and one that conforms remarkably well to the reality of electoral politics in Canada. There is no denying that Canada's political parties develop and deliver a specific product line to voters over the course of an election cycle. As well, they routinely modify their 'brand image' to appeal to a broader spectrum of potential supporters. But this level of responsiveness is almost entirely ephemeral. To be sure, voters seldom have a direct hand in determining the precise contents, marketing strategy, or quality of 'the product' on offer. In addition, voters generally lack the power "to control or set the terms of actual elections, including the regulation of campaign finance, television ads, and debate formats" (Wolin 2008: 149).

The difference between 'passive sovereignty' and 'active governance' would appear to be lost on the exponents of e-democracy. Naturally, this is the *sine qua non* for deploying a comprehensive range of digital platforms—to eliminate the barriers that impair efficacy and effective participation. Yet, as Wolin (2008) has suggested voting and elections are not the functional equivalents of genuine participation. And this is important because many liberal democratic governments have pitched e-voting and e-consultation as a way to resolve civic disengagement.<sup>5</sup> The more critical point to be made here, however, is that while plebicitarian democracy and/or e-consultation may empower citizens on one level, there is no reason to believe that it will necessarily supplant the decision-making structures and processes that prevail in most 'self-governing' regimes.

With regards to Canada, the matter of executive predominance or prime ministerial-centered government is an issue that requires further consideration. As has been well documented by Martin (2010), Turner (2009), White (2005), Simpson (2001), Savoie (1999), Aucoin (1994), and McQuaig (1995, 1991, 1987), Canadian prime ministers have tended to exercise considerable control over vital national policy issues—such as the economy, free trade, tax redistribution, national defence, and social programs—through a resolute and rather moribund set of party and cabinet conventions and through several important federal agencies.<sup>6</sup> For instance, Good's (2007) brilliant expose into the 'politics of public money' details the close relationship between prime ministers and ministers of finance—especially under Chrétien—and presents fiscal policy as a highly centralized (and exclusive) process. This is not to assert an absence of communication or consultation with key stakeholders, but rather to suggest that crucial areas of government policy are not always subject to widespread deliberation. In certain instances they are determined internally and contingent on specific institutional, contextual (i.e., prevailing security or economic conditions), and agency based priorities and preferences (Hale 2002; McQuaig 1995, 1987). The issue of taxation and tax redistribution is especially striking because it represents one of the most important functions performed by state and sub-state governments. Fundamentally, it is the well-spring from which many other policy decisions flow.

Again, it is difficult to comprehend how e-democracy and/or e-governance programs can eliminate or even restrict executive supremacy and whether it is wise to do so. There are at least four additional challenges to assess here. First, would elected officials be willing to have proposed budgetary allocations, tax measures, and/or portfolio appointments scrutinized and routinely voted on by the electorate? Second, do ordinary citizens possess the instrumental competence to make well reasoned judgments on these matters, and how would e-democracy improve this situation? Liberal democratic regimes are not perfect, but one of the more common limitations highlighted by some theorists is that 'political resources, skills, awareness,

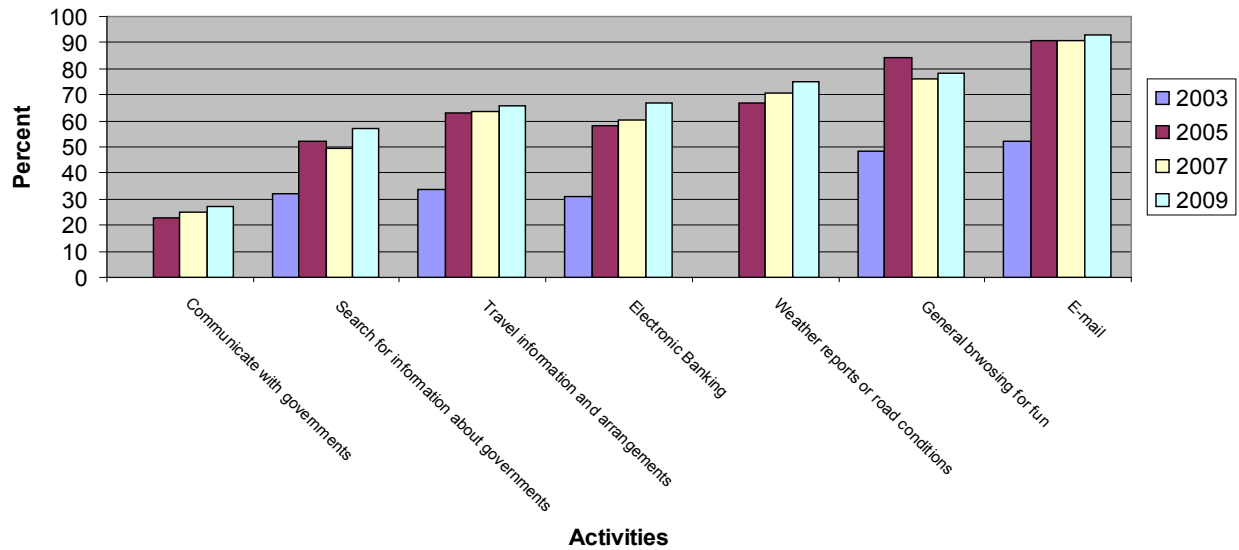


and incentives are always unequally distributed' (Dahl 2006: 50-55; Dahl 1989). There is also the matter of allotting sufficient time to pursue political endeavours. Ordinary citizens lack influence partly because time is a scarce and fixed commodity—hence they also lack a measure of political equality (Dahl 2006: 55-59). All of this might explain why special interests tend to exert disproportionate influence over crucial policy issues. They possess enough time, resources, and incentive to lobby state officials over the course of their tenure in public office (Zakaria 2007; Dahl 2006; Newman 1998; McQuaig 1991, 1987). Long standing parliamentary traditions such as party discipline and cabinet solidarity are likely to remain insulated against the effects of e-democracy as well.

Yet, the federal and provincial governments in Canada have placed some emphasis on cultivating stakeholder networks where and when they are required (McNutt and Carey 2008). This transition constitutes a positive development in the consultative capacity of public institutions. Indeed, ICTs can be used, and are used, to enhance the bilateral or multilateral transmission of critical information between and among key interest groups and elected and non-elected officials. However, collaborative ventures of this sort do little to allay the feelings of disaffected voters. Policy networks, by their very nature, are highly restrictive arrangements that consist of layers of authority and influence. Put differently, the organizations and actors that contribute to policy development do not always represent a diverse cross section of society's various interests. In this instance, then, ICTs can be used (and are used) to strengthen preexisting lines of contact, but not exclusively for the purpose of empowering voters.

A third area that merits more attention is Internet usage (Min 2010). Statistics Canada's survey results have consistently shown that the bulk of Internet usage is dedicated to e-mailing, general browsing for fun, checking weather conditions, obtaining travel information or making travel arrangements, and electronic banking (The Daily 2010, 2008, 2006; Veenhof et al 2008; CANSIM 2003). In 2009, 27 percent of respondents indicated some online communication with government—and a little over half of all survey respondents used the Internet to 'search for Canadian government information'—but these results are not encouraging.<sup>7</sup> Figure 2 highlights Canadian 'home Internet use' from 2003 to 2009.

Interestingly, the data on citizen-government interaction also show that most home Internet users have very little need or interest in government online services and that a noticeable minority prefer to use 'traditional methods, such as the telephone, to connect with public institutions' (Underhill and Ladds 2007: 10-11). The most telling result, however, is that between the 2005 and 2009 a mere 2 percent of respondents actually 'provided opinion during online government consultation' (CANSIM 2009). Part of the problem would appear to be access. While it true that Canada's Internet penetration rate has improved since 2001, it is also true that a significant number of Canadians continue to lack meaningful access to Web-based communications platforms<sup>8</sup>—close to 25 percent in rural communities (The Daily 2010). Predictably, the 'digital divide' widens with regards to income, age, geographic location, and educational level attained (Marlow and McNish 2010; Middleton and Sorensen 2005; Sciadras 2002; Norris 2001).

**Figure 2. Selected Activities of Canadian Home Internet Users, 2003-2009**

Sources: The Daily 2010, 2006; Veenhof et al 2008; CANSIM 2003

In addition, it is important to recognize that Canada has systemic literacy and numeracy problems that have yet to be addressed (Canadian Council on Learning 2008; OECD and Statistics Canada 2005, 2000). In 2008, the Canadian Council on Learning issued a report on adult literacy that suggested that over the next twenty years Canada is unlikely to experience any obvious improvements in the country's already high incidence of low literacy (7-45). Remarkably, the report also indicated that approximately half of all Canadians (aged 16-65) currently lack the necessary literacy skills required to cope with 'modern society' (Canadian Council on Learning 2008). The extent to which this state of affairs is left unresolved will almost certainly have some bearing on eligible voters short on the skill sets (or the resources) required to navigate through e-consultation and online service programs (Min 2010).

The final two elements worth examining are the expected quality of engagement—how e-democracy, among other things, will rectify voter apathy?—and the extent to which voters should be deliberating and deciding on crucial policy issues. As was noted earlier, cyber-optimists contend that e-voting has the potential to empower ordinary citizens beyond more conventional methods for selecting governments. It is argued that touch screen technology or 'mouse-clicks' can provide constituents with a far more enriching participatory experience.

In Canada's case, there is simply not enough evidence to support this claim. Yet, there are other pressing issues to contemplate as well. For one, it is often assumed that citizens want to be engaged; that is, that they want to participate more frequently in the 'act of governing.' It is not certain that they do. This is not to say that Canadians are apolitical, but if recent election turnout rates are any indication of the current levels of interest in Canadian politics (especially among the 18-24 age group, and the cohort most likely to benefit from e-democracy and e-governance), then it is hard to imagine how Internet based applications will augment an already weak and crude system of representation (Pammett and LeDuc 2003).<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding the convenience that it offers, the idea of e-voting as empowering requires quite a logical and

conceptual leap of faith. Casting a ballot in favour of candidates X, Y, or Z is still a procedural act. In other words, whether it is done from the comfort of one's home or an elementary school is largely irrelevant. It remains an act of symbolic reassurance and as Edelman (1964) has pointed out an event primarily designed to reinforce conformity and reaffirm a fundamental belief in democracy.

As well, it may be pertinent to ask how e-voting will resolve voter apathy and restore confidence in elected officials? The October 2008 federal election saw only 59 percent of eligible voters cast a ballot. Since 1988, general (federal) elections have experienced a linear decline in voter participation—despite a more aggressive commitment to e-government (Docherty and White 2004; Pammett and LeDuc 2003). Several explanations have been presented to account for this abrupt decline in voter interest, but some of the more common causes highlighted in the literature are: 1) a lack interest; 2) a lack of policy alternatives and quality candidates (and therefore a lack of confidence in the value of this form of political expression); and 3) a lack of motivation and the awareness required to make an informed decision (Docherty and White 2004; Pammett and LeDuc 2003; Wattenberg 1998). Unlimited access to government information and services is unlikely to change public attitudes and may even exacerbate these problems given the volumes of information that are available to citizens.

Interest in politics needs to be cultivated and reinforced from an early age. Through a process of education, citizens can acquire the indispensable foundational knowledge needed to make important political decisions. Therefore, a more genuine commitment to public education might be a better policy alternative to improving voter turnout rates than any investment in telecommunications technology. Even so, there is no guarantee that all citizens will be properly equipped to contribute to the political decision making process.

This brings us to our final point for discussion. Scholars and political pundits are actually divided on the true value of e-democracy (Johnson 2007; Vedel 2006; Anderson and Bishop 2005). For example, Kampen and Snijkers (2003) have correctly pointed out that “[a] lot of policy matters are connected in a complex way and cannot be handled as isolated problems” (494). With this in mind, it might be instructive to propose a hypothetical scenario: would Canadian voters accept an increase in health care spending, but also reject a moderate increase in personal income tax rates? This returns us to the issue of competence and whether citizens—in every instance—are capable of weighing up and sifting through multifaceted and interrelated policy issues (Norris 2001). Of course, this does not mean that thoughtful and well reasoned deliberation should be eliminated from the decision-making process. As Gutmann and Thompson (2004, 1996) contend, there are both very good procedural and substantive reasons for examining crucial issues of public policy within a deliberative framework. But the ‘persistence of moral disagreement,’ in and of itself, provides insufficient justification to defer to the collective wisdom of majorities where minority interests are at stake.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, holding e-referendums on contested subjects such as reinstating the death penalty for serious criminal code violations or prohibiting niqabs (Muslim face veils) in public buildings would definitely alter Canada's political and social landscape, but not necessarily for the better. Referendums are reactive instruments asking voters to decide between two predetermined alternatives. They do not have to be input based mechanisms and can be easily reduced to simple ‘yes or no’ and/or preference oriented measures (Wolin 2008). To what extent then, do citizens remain autonomous agents or merely subjects to be politicized under these types of circumstances? And, should progressively oriented societies tolerate ‘a herd’ based approach to decision

making? These are important considerations that cast some doubt over the notion that e-democracy should be regarded as “an obligatory [and] unavoidable part of democracy’s evolution” (Roy 2006: 241).

## **Concluding Remarks**

In response to an e-consultation report commissioned by the Institute of Research and Public Policy (IRPP) in 2008, McNutt remarked that for e-consultation to improve democratic governance ‘four prerequisite conditions needed be met: public awareness, issue literacy, willingness to provide feedback, and political will’ (2008: 30). She added that “[i]mproving existing political processes require[d] the electronic engagement of citizens to respond not only to public distrust in government activity but also to citizens’ displeasure with Canadian democratic arrangements” (2008: 30). McNutt’s assessment is, of course, spot on. Yet, here in lies the crux of the problem. Despite the federal and provincial governments’ efforts to digitize certain administrative and management functions, Canada remains deficient in the areas of ‘awareness, literacy, and determination.’ Moreover, there is no reason to believe that Canada’s federal government will initiate a sweeping set of technologically inspired programs to better ‘respond to citizens concerns.’ However, all of this may be largely beside the point. Democracy and individual freedom are indivisible, and there is now a significant portion of Canada’s voting population that has decided to exercise their ‘freedom’ in a rather peculiar way. For many, ‘individual freedom means the freedom not to vote and/or to opt out of civic life’ entirely (Bauerlein 2009: 213). No amount of technology is likely to change this.

As has been highlighted above, the implications of e-democracy and the usefulness of e-governance initiatives and programs in Canada appears to raise several important questions. Again, this is not to assert that technology cannot be used to enhance government services or even to improve the lines of communication between and among policy actors. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that e-government does have some serious limitations and that it may have already reached its upper limit.

Internet based communications tools can be used to support or supplement a host of government operations, but it is not a panacea for what currently ails Canada. In effect, it is a technology that allows for the transmission of a great deal of information. It can also be used to interact with government agencies within a clearly defined set of parameters—such as submitting tax returns. However, utilizing the Internet and telecommunications technologies to advance the cause of direct democracy, or to simply empower ordinary citizens, would seem an inadequate substitute to other types of democratic reform which might include fundamental changes to Canada’s current electoral system (Pilon 2007). This does not mean that Internet technologies can not bring voters closer to their political representatives and the policy making process. But the feasibility and usefulness of ICTs should be viewed with a fair dose of skepticism. Indeed, this article has shown that several important obstacles need to be overcome before Canadians decide on what the appropriate course of action should be for the country’s existing democratic regime.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers assigned to this manuscript and the editorial team at CPSR for their helpful and constructive feedback. Their dedication to professionalism and rigour is truly appreciated.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, the OECD's report on the 'Promise and Problems of E-Democracy' (2003) asserts from the outset that: a) "governments around the world are committed to facilitating wider public participation in policy making" (29); and b) that "citizens are emerging as producers, rather than just consumers, of policy" (30). The extent, to which this is actually occurring, especially in Canada's case, can be contested at multiple levels.
- <sup>3</sup> Switzerland's recent referendum to ban minarets is another arresting example of this trend (Swiss Vote, 2009; Swiss Voters, 2009).
- <sup>4</sup> Definitions of e-government, e-governance, and e-democracy abound (see, for example, OECD 2003: 23).
- <sup>5</sup> Voting is generally considered to be "the benchmark measure for political participation and civic engagement" (Keown 2007: 38). However, the author recognizes that this is not the only form of political participation. Still, the data on 'non-voting political activity' are not encouraging. In 2007, Keown reported that only one in three Canadians actually participated in some form of non-voting political activity—and much of it was dedicated to political information searches (Keown 2007).
- <sup>6</sup> The CBC's recent report on the Prime Minister's Office 'message control' practices in another revealing case in point (CBC 2010).
- <sup>7</sup> The modest increase in 'government information searches' may be due, in part, to the employment insurance inquires related to the 2008 economic recession.
- <sup>8</sup> It is also important to point out that Canada's reputation as a leader in information and communications technology has declined significantly since 2002. According to a report issued by the International Telecommunication Union, Canada has now fallen to 19<sup>th</sup> out 154 countries on how advanced its use of ICTs is—a drop of 10 places from 2002. Canada has also dropped to 10<sup>th</sup> place in terms of broadband penetration—in 2002 Canada was ranked second (CBC 2009).
- <sup>9</sup> A minority of political enthusiasts might continue to 'blog' or offer up superficial appraisals on important policy matters, but they will remain a rather inconspicuous segment of Canada's of 'political village.'
- <sup>10</sup> According to Gutmann and Thompson (1996), the 'persistence of moral disagreement' and the accordant resolution of moral disagreement on issues such as abortion, health care, and affirmative action (or in Canada's case equity employment) is a central feature of liberal democratic politics.

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