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NEWS RELEASE

E-consultation necessary to counteract democratic deficit Study says on-line forums increase public involvement in decision-making

Montreal – Voter turnout in Canada has been declining steadily for decades, and voter turnout in the recent federal election dropped to the lowest percentage ever recorded. Only 59.1 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot in October 2008. Public involvement, through e-consultation, is one way for Canada’s democratic institutions to reduce voter apathy, build trust and establish a stronger relationship between governments and citizens, according to a study released by the Institute for Research on Public Policy.

The study, “E-Consultation: Enabling Democracy between Elections,” by Joseph Peters and Manon Abud explores e-consultation, its strengths and weaknesses, using four case studies. The authors conclude that on-line forums are a valuable, if not essential, part of a new era of democratic governance.

“Canada has come to an interesting crossroads in voter turnout,” says Peters. “In the past three elections, the number of Canadians who were eligible to vote and did not was larger than the number who voted for the winning party.”

Online consultations can reduce the democratic deficit, according to the authors, who argue that public involvement over the Internet can help close the gap between the public’s expectations and what democratic institutions actually deliver. E-consultations can also increase civic literacy and improve discourse by reaching beyond the ‘usual suspects’. They can expand perspectives and enrich the sources of input into the democratic decision-making process by allowing the broader public to engage in the dialogue.

“E-consultations cannot eliminate the democratic deficit on its own, and it does not need to replace traditional face-to-face public involvement,” notes Abud. “But, it can serve as a convenient and broad-based complement to an event like a roundtable or town hall meeting. It’s a new and tangible way for Canadian democratic institutions to make better decisions through an engaged public.”

“E-Consultation: Enabling Democracy between Elections” by Joseph Peters and Manon Abud, with comments by Kathleen McNutt and Colin McKay, can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org.

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