

# Summary

E-Consultation: Enabling  
Democracy between Elections  
*by Joseph Peters and Manon Abud*

A democratic deficit can manifest itself in a number of symptoms, such as low voter turnout, low participation in political parties, and declining trust in political leadership and democratic institutions. Another less recognized symptom of a democratic deficit is a gap between a population's preferences and the actions governments take, resulting in governments' inability to deliver on the results the population desires.

Many solutions have been proposed to cure this deficit, such as electoral reforms or increasing the political knowledge of young Canadians, but most of these solutions would be difficult to implement and would take considerable time to produce benefits. One thing that all the proponents of these solutions would agree on is that increased and more meaningful public involvement would improve discourse, expand dialogue and engage people in the decision-making processes of our democratic institutions.

In this study Joseph Peters and Manon Abud (Ascentum Inc.) start by making the case that Canada is in a state of democratic deficit, and then they propose e-consultation as a way to mitigate this deficit by increasing public involvement in democratic processes. While they admit that it is not a panacea for our democratic challenges, they demonstrate that it is an emerging approach and a tangible way for Canadian democratic institutions to make better decisions through an engaged public.

The authors define e-consultation as the use of information and communications technologies to involve different publics through different forms of interaction with democratic institutions. Among other benefits, they say, it could increase civic literacy and allow the public to be engaged in discourse and dialogue, thus addressing key symptoms of the democratic deficit, including closing the gap between expectations and what is actually delivered.

Peters and Abud then present some practical applications of e-consultation through several case studies. The first is in a parliamentary context: an e-consultation on mental health undertaken by the Senate of Canada. The second is a public administration consultation undertaken by Social Development Canada on priority issues such as care giving, child care, seniors, persons with disabilities and communities. The third is from the voluntary sector, the Canadian Medical Association's e-consultation with its membership on specialty care. The final example comes from outside the Canadian context, but provides a model to aspire to. It is an e-consultation initiative undertaken by the Government of New Zealand on prebirth testing. For each example the authors discuss strategic concerns, the approach that they

took, their findings, the challenges and what they learned in the process.

Based on the information presented in the case studies and their experience with public involvement and e-consultation, the authors make several policy recommendations for those involved in democratic governance and intending to conduct on-line consultations. These recommendations include the need to:

- create a credible and legitimate consultation process that is as inclusive and representative as possible;
- provide a rationale for participating in the consultation;
- ensure the design of the e-consultation is sound, e.g., that it uses accessible language, there is adequate time for participation and it incorporates the specific needs of the target audience(s); and
- build an evaluation into the process.

They emphasize that on its own e-consultation can not address the democratic deficit. However, they argue that public involvement is a key part of a new model of democratic governance. With time, resources and commitment, meaningful e-consultation could facilitate a shift in public perspectives and renew the public's belief, trust and interest in our democratic institutions.

Two commentators provide academic and practitioner perspectives. Kathleen McNutt (University of Regina) agrees with the authors that e-consultation has the potential to facilitate democratic dialogue and be an effective tool in overcoming citizen's discontent with modern democratic institutions. However, she challenges the idea that it can successfully contribute to an increase in public trust without a binding commitment from governments to incorporate into policy development the feedback they receive through the consultations. According to McNutt, without substantial changes to the process of valuing public input, citizens' perception of government responsiveness will remain unchanged. Colin McKay (Privacy Commissioner of Canada) also agrees with Peters' and Abud's diagnosis of the problem and the use of e-consultation to increase public involvement in democracies. He describes some of the main challenges of the process, drawing an important distinction between stakeholder consultations and broader public engagements. He also points to some interesting examples of the latter in the United Kingdom and the United States, for instance, its use by Barack Obama in his electoral campaign. He stresses that whether on-line engagement can be translated into the policy development process, which he sees as one of the greatest tests of e-consultation, remains to be seen.