



# Rethinking Citizen Engagement 2007

**A SURVEY OF THE GENERAL PUBLIC  
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES INC.**

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## EKOS RESEARCH ASSOCIATES

Ottawa Office  
99 Metcalfe Street, Suite 1100  
Ottawa, Ontario  
K1P 6L7  
Tel: (613) 235 7215  
Fax: (613) 235 8498  
E-mail: [pobox@ekos.com](mailto:pobox@ekos.com)

Toronto Office  
480 University Avenue, Suite 1006  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5G 1V2  
Tel: (416) 598 8002  
Fax: (416) 598 2543  
E-mail: [toronto@ekos.com](mailto:toronto@ekos.com)

Edmonton Office  
9925 109th St. NW, Suite 606  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5K 2J8  
Tel: (780) 408 5225  
Fax: (780) 408 5233  
E-mail: [edmonton@ekos.com](mailto:edmonton@ekos.com)

# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year of Rethinking Citizen Engagement examined a wide range of issues related to civic participation and engagement, such as views on consultations, preferred consultation methods and features, and satisfaction with government efforts in consulting with Canadians. Given the growing importance of new technologies in allowing citizens to engage with governments (and other citizens), the study also included a number of questions examining Canadian views on engaging citizens through the Internet. Results of the survey are summarized below, and are outlined in more detail in later sections of this report.

## ***Views on Consultations***

Government-sponsored consultations provide an opportunity for citizens to provide input on important policy issues, however, survey results reveal that Canadians express mixed views on the benefits of engaging citizens. Seven in ten Canadians (71 per cent) agree that if people like themselves got together, they would be able to change things for the better, and two-thirds (66 per cent) feel that we would probably solve most of our big national problems if decisions could be brought to people at the grassroots. At the same time however, many Canadians feel that citizens lack the information necessary to make a meaningful contribution to public policy debate (70 per cent), and that it is virtually impossible for average citizens to make a real difference (51 per cent).

Looking at the perceived effectiveness of various methods that could be used to gather the views of Canadians, face to face consultations were seen as most useful (61 per cent), followed closely by the Internet (59 per cent) and town-hall meetings (57 per cent). Just over half (54 per cent) felt public opinion polls would be useful for gathering the input of Canadians, while half (50 per cent), were similarly supportive of 1-800 telephone numbers. Mailouts to gather citizen feedback was seen as the least effective method, with only 41 per cent indicating that this tool would be useful to register citizen feedback.

Turning to views on the perceived effectiveness of a number of methods to express citizen views to the federal government, results reveal that Canadians tend to prefer more traditional methods over the use of new technologies. Voting during elections was seen as the most effective way to express citizens' views among the ideas tested (seen as effective by 67 per cent of Canadians), followed by contacting a Member of Parliament (59 per cent), and writing a letter to a newspaper (51 per cent). Fewer than half felt creating a website or blog devoted to an issue (46 per cent) or posting views on an Internet site devoted to an issue (45 per cent) would be effective. At the bottom of the list was calling a government department or office (42 per cent), or participating in an organized protest (40 per cent).

When asked about the effect of a range of consultation features on their likelihood of participation in a consultation, having people available with subject matter expertise to answer questions, and receiving a report or some sort of feedback based on consultation results were seen as the best ways to encourage participation (with seven in ten or more indicating these features would increase the likelihood of their participation). Face to face interaction was also seen as increasing the likelihood of participation by a

majority of Canadians (54 per cent), while just under half (49 per cent) felt that being paid would increase their likelihood of participation. Interestingly, having the consultation run on the Internet was at the bottom of the list (with only 42 per cent indicating this would increase the likelihood of their participation).

### ***Satisfaction with Government of Canada Consultation Efforts***

Canadians were asked to rate the Government of Canada's performance in terms of consulting with Canadians. Results reveal fairly negative views on federal government efforts in this area: almost half (49 per cent) feel the Government of Canada is doing a poor job in this area, and only 18 per cent rate federal efforts in consulting Canadians as good.

Turning to perceptions of federal performance in consulting with Canadians on a range of specific policy areas, results suggest general dissatisfaction with Government of Canada efforts across all the issues examined. The only area where the plurality assign a positive rating is in terms of consulting with Canadians about the quality of service it provides (36 per cent). Only one in three feel the federal government is doing a good job in consulting on issues related to health care or the environment. About one in four feel the Government of Canada is doing a good job consulting with Canadians about defence issues, resource sustainability, foreign policy, and agricultural issues. And, at the bottom of the list, only one in five Canadians feel the federal government is doing a good job of consulting on immigration or Aboriginal issues.

Despite fairly negative views on Government of Canada consultation efforts, findings suggest that Canadians strongly feel it is important to consult with citizens. Fully 86 per cent of Canadians say that they would feel better about government decision-making if they knew that governments sought informed input from average citizens on a regular basis, and only five per cent disagree with this idea.

Results also reveal that Canadians feel it is important that the Government of Canada consult with all segments of Canadian society. Three-quarters of Canadians feel it is important to consult with Canadian seniors (77 per cent) and young Canadians (75 per cent), and more than six in ten (62 per cent) feel it is important to consult with Aboriginal people.

### ***Personal Participation in Government Consultations***

Respondents were also asked about their experience with government consultations. They were first asked how many times in the past year they had taken part in a government-sponsored consultation. Results reveal that overall participation in government consultations is fairly low, with three in four Canadians (77 per cent) indicating they have not participated in a government-sponsored consultation in the past 12 months. One in five (22 per cent) say they have taken part in a consultation either once (eight per cent), twice (seven per cent) or three times or more (seven per cent) in the past year.

Those who indicated they had participated in a government-sponsored consultation were asked a number of follow-up questions. Results reveal that the plurality of these respondents (39 per cent) say the consultation took place in the form of a public opinion poll or survey, and slightly fewer (32 per cent) say they attended a meeting or event in the community. Fewer than one in ten say the consultation took place through the Internet (nine per cent), or through a mail-out (eight per cent).

When asked what the focus of the consultation was, no one issue/area dominated the responses. Government issues in general was cited as the focus of the consultation by 15 per cent of these respondents, followed by a focus on the environment (12 per cent), and health care (10 per cent). Elections (nine per cent), social/community-related issues (seven per cent) and local issues (five per cent) were also mentioned by a number of these respondents.

Those who indicated they had taken part in a government-sponsored consultation were also asked if sufficient background material was provided to them. Results suggest general satisfaction with the information given prior to the consultation: seven in ten (69 per cent) indicated they were provided with sufficient background material to enable them to provide informed feedback during the consultation. However, findings also suggest that relatively few were provided with follow-up information after their participation in the consultation. Only one-third (37 per cent) said they were provided with follow-up information on the consultation, while six in ten (59 per cent) said they did not receive follow-up information.

Results also reveal that seven in ten who participated in government consultations express satisfaction with the consultation overall (69 per cent), and a similar proportion report satisfaction with the ease in which they were able to participate in the consultation, and the opportunity they had to voice their opinion (72 per cent each). However, consistent with previous findings, far fewer are satisfied with the feedback they received on consultation results: 34 per cent express satisfaction with this aspect of the consultation, while 38 per cent express dissatisfaction.

### ***Views on Engaging Canadians Through Internet***

The Internet provides users access to a wealth of information on virtually every subject imaginable, all while providing them with an opportunity to discuss important issues with others through a range of on-line options (e.g., social networking sites, blogs). With this in mind, Rethinking Citizen Engagement probed Canadians for their views on the importance of the Internet in engaging citizens.

Results reveal that traditional media continue to be the primary source of Canadians' information about politics and government affairs. Television is the most common source for this type of information (cited by 42 per cent of respondents), followed by newspapers (28 per cent). Only about one in six (17 per cent) say they most often turn to the Internet for information on politics/government affairs, and one in ten (11 per cent) identified radio.

Results also reveal that Canadians hold somewhat mixed views regarding the importance of the Internet in engaging citizens on policy issues. Fewer than half (46 per cent) agree that the Internet plays an important role in engaging Canadians on policy issues and problems, while one in five (20 per cent) disagree with this idea.

Canadians also hold mixed views regarding the trustworthiness of the Internet as a source of information on politics and government affairs. Only about one-third (35 per cent) believes the Internet is a "very" trustworthy source of information on politics and government affairs. A similar proportion (37 per cent)

think the Internet is “somewhat” trustworthy, and about one in five (19 per cent) believe the Internet is not trustworthy at all.

Survey results reveal that despite the growing use and attention given to new media technologies such as blogs and social networking sites, familiarity with these media is fairly low. Only 23 per cent of Canadians say they are familiar with blogging, and more than half (55 per cent) say they are not familiar. Results further reveal that fewer than one in ten of those who express familiarity with blogs (nine per cent) say they read blogs dedicated solely to the discussion of politics/government affairs at least two to three times a week, while the plurality (30 per cent) indicate they *never* read blogs dedicated solely to the discussion of politics and government affairs.

Similar findings are exhibited when looking at social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace: only one in four Canadians (25 per cent) say they are familiar with these sites, compared to six in ten (59 per cent) who are not. Among those who indicate familiarity with social networking sites, only six per cent say they visit such sites solely for the purpose of discussing politics and government affairs at least two to three times a week, while nearly six in ten (58 per cent) say they never visit such sites for the purpose of discussing politics/government affairs.

Respondents were also asked to rate the usefulness of both blogs and social networking sites for gathering views from the public and providing an opportunity for citizens to debate public issues before government makes important decisions. Results reveal fairly negative views on the perceived usefulness of new electronic media in citizen debate: only one in four (26 per cent) think blogs and social networking sites are useful, while one in three (32 per cent) say such sites are not useful.

## **Conclusions**

Results of the survey suggest that Canadians hold somewhat mixed views on government engagement and consultation efforts. While clear majorities support the idea of citizen participation in government decision-making, Canadians are sceptical of the process and the results of these consultation/engagement exercises (as well as their own ability to provide a meaningful contribution to policy making). This is not to suggest that Canadians don't want governments to consult/engage Canadians in decision making (survey results clearly suggest otherwise), but rather that when undertaking such exercises, care should be taken to ensure that the process is transparent, inclusive and accountable (feedback on consultation results is an area that is in need of particular improvement).

Results also suggest that despite the promise of new media to help citizens provide input into government decision-making, the public is not yet ready to fully embrace these new technologies as a means of engagement. For example, creating a blog or posting views on an Internet site are seen as less effective in expressing citizens' views than traditional means such as voting, contacting an MP, or writing a letter to a newspaper. In addition, when asked how to best encourage participation in consultations, having the consultation run on the Internet was at the bottom of the list of tested features. Moreover, findings suggest that familiarity with blogs and social networking sites is fairly low, and regular use of these sites for the discussion of political and government affairs is even lower.