Low Voter Turnouts: An Alternate Explanation

October 17, 2003 – The trend to lower voter turnouts in many recent elections in Canada is often seen as a sign of apathy or cynicism on the part of citizens.

A new publication from CPRN points to a different interpretation.

Citizens' Dialogue Experience: Follow-up Survey Results by CPRN Researcher, Nandini Saxena, provides insight into the factors that determine the level of citizen engagement in the political process. The paper assesses the impact of an intensive engagement experience on participants' subsequent political activity.

"There is a world of difference between today's apparent disaffection with traditional political processes and the tremendous enthusiasm we see when citizens have an opportunity to participate in intensive dialogue on important policy issues," says Mary Pat MacKinnon, Director of CPRN's Public Involvement Network.

Respondents to the current survey all took part in one of 10 day-long deliberative dialogues CPRN conducted across the country in the Fall of 2002. The dialogues sought to define a citizens' vision for Canada ten years from now, the steps needed to achieve that vision, and the role citizens, their communities, markets and governments should play. *Citizens' Dialogue on Canada's Future: A 21st Century Social Contract*, published in April 2003, presented the key findings and policy implications of the dialogue.

Participants in that dialogue made it clear that they want to assume a more active role in public policy. They called for the creation of a clearly defined space to allow them to participate in major decisions between elections.

"Today's post-dialogue survey backs up those results," says MacKinnon. "It suggests that it is not apathy, but a lack of opportunity to connect with government that lies behind low levels of engagement in the traditional political process."

The survey results make it clear that the value of public dialogues goes beyond their potential contribution to public policy. Participation in dialogues increases citizens' confidence in their ability to contribute to policy discussions. It also convinces them of the value of engaging with their peers and with decision makers in the development of public policy.

Some of the survey's principal findings:

- 45% of respondents increased their participation in public affairs following the dialogue experience.

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- A large majority of respondents – 69% – took additional steps to inform themselves on public affairs following the dialogue. 61% of these also increased their level of activity in public affairs.
- 91% of respondents see dialogues as a useful way of improving the quality of communication among Canadians and between citizens and decision makers. 77% would participate in another dialogue if invited.

"These findings suggest that future political reforms should include a commitment to making citizen engagement an integral part of the ongoing political process in this country," MacKinnon says. "Public policy will benefit and a measure of faith in the political system will be restored."

You can access or download a copy of this document by clicking here.

Judith Maxwell Wins Award

The Pierre Elliott Trudeau Foundation has chosen CPRN's President, Judith Maxwell, to be a Trudeau Mentor.

The Trudeau Foundation's "intellectual network" of Fellows, Scholars and Mentors, is dedicated to "finding innovative policy solutions to important issues facing Canada and the world". Areas of study and research include Human Rights and Social Justice, Responsible Citizenship, Canada and the World, and Humans and their Natural Environment.

The Trudeau Mentors are selected from nominations solicited "from leaders in many walks of life, from business and government, to the academic community and the arts". Mentors agree to work with one or more of twelve Trudeau Scholars for the next year.

The other Mentors for this year are Justice Louise Arbour, Allan E. Blakeney, Elizabeth Dowdeswell, L. Yves Fortier, Michael Harcourt and Ken Wiwa.

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