e-Government and e-Democracy in Switzerland and Canada
Using online tools to improve civic participation

Summary report of a roundtable discussion

Ottawa, Ontario

April 8, 2011
Public Policy Forum

Building Better Government

The Public Policy Forum is an independent, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of government in Canada through enhanced dialogue among the public, private and voluntary sectors. The Forum's members, drawn from business, federal, provincial and territorial governments, the voluntary sector and organized labour, share a belief that an efficient and effective public service is important in ensuring Canada's competitiveness abroad and quality of life at home.

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e-Government and e-Democracy in Switzerland and Canada

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e-Government and e-Democracy in Switzerland and Canada

Introduction

The Public Policy Forum is partnering with a select number of embassies to host a series of intimate lunches and dinners that are exploring the international relationships that are of importance to ensuring a strong and prosperous Canada.

On April 8, 2011 we partnered with the Embassy of Switzerland in Canada and convened a small group of senior leaders from the public and private sectors to discuss the role of electronic tools in the delivery of government and democratic services.

This report summarizes the main points that were discussed during the roundtable, highlighting key opportunities and challenges inherent in the Swiss and Canadian e-government models. While Switzerland and Canada lead most other nations in utilizing online tools, both face significant policy challenges as they expand their approach to e-government and e-democracy. Some of these challenges include: facilitating more private-public partnerships; reducing jurisdictional barriers, and; improving service delivery to remote communities. As technology improves and citizens become more reliant on online services, both Switzerland and Canada will be expected to make their e-services more innovative, efficient and faster. This report presents some alternative approaches, including possible solutions that may help both countries respond to the unique challenges they face.

We wish to thank His Excellency Werner Baumann, Ambassador of Switzerland to Canada, Ms. Corina Casanova, Federal Chancellor of Switzerland, and all participants in the roundtable discussion for their contribution to this important dialogue, comparing the state of e-government and e-democracy in Switzerland and Canada.

A list of participants can be found in the Appendix.
e-Government

The division of power between Switzerland’s federal government, twenty-six cantons and over two-and-a-half thousand communes makes creating a standard e-government framework very complex. Like Canadian provinces, Swiss cantons enjoy a considerable amount of autonomy over policymaking, operate under government processes that are dissimilar from one another, and are subdivided by language.

In 2007, Switzerland moved to address these jurisdictional and language challenges with the launch of its e-government framework agreement. This “joint strategy” established a tripartite steering committee made up of the federal, cantonal and communal governments as well as an advisory council comprised of nine specialists from the public, private and academic sectors. The steering committee is supported by an administrative e-government agency which helps to implement the governments’ three core objectives:

- Transition into a system where most public-private transactions are completed electronically;
- Modernize public sector processes and encourage governments and departments to interact with each other electronically, and;
- Move frequent or time-consuming transactions between citizens and the public service online.

Under this multi-level e-government framework, Switzerland’s governments are now coordinating forty projects that utilize technology to make government services more accessible to citizens. For example, individuals who move from one commune to another must give notice of their departure and register in the new place of residence. In the past, this registration process was very complicated and varied by canton. However, the new framework agreement has helped normalize process across governments, allowing citizens to register electronically with their new canton using standardized forms.

Similarly, Canadian governments are guided by a desire to improve service delivery, information-sharing and public engagement through the use of e-tools. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Canadian governments began utilizing online tools to increase the public’s access to government services. Over the last decade, federal and provincial public services have developed portals to inform and connect with Canadians; have expanded online education and citizen engagement programs, and; are now experimenting with online public health consultations. Roundtable participants noted that citizens have begun to see this “public service value chain” as facilitating greater information-sharing processes and helping to increase levels of public engagement. Interestingly, the government’s use of these online services is increasingly being driven by the public’s demand for quick access to government services, and is helping to build citizens’ trust in the public service.
While both Switzerland and Canada have enjoyed early successes with e-government service programs, complicated government processes continue to make open government and e-government difficult. Roundtable participants agreed that there is a need in both countries to make process simpler by standardizing forms, information and procedures across departments, agencies and governments.

Senior public officials in Switzerland and Canada must also recognize and tighten the link between public servants and the wider public. According to one roundtable participant, connecting with citizens builds morale within the public service and strengthens confidence in government institutions. With these concerns in mind, roundtable participants noted that the shift towards online tools has still propelled Switzerland and Canada ahead of most nations in e-government services.

Public-Private Relationships

The Swiss cantons have also utilized online tools to engage non-government stakeholders in policy formation. Over the last decade, Swiss governments have moved their consultation processes online in order to consult a wider circle of experts and key organizations. These online consultations allow Swiss governments to facilitate negotiations and collect information from a wider array of stakeholders during every stage of the policy formulation process.

Canadian governments have also developed close relationships with the private sector in order to help deliver e-government services. In recent years, the public sector has worked closely with leaders in the high tech industry to pool resources and deliver services and materials to Canadians. By providing some of the telecommunications equipment and expertise, the private sector has helped the Government of Canada deliver e-government services to thousands of citizens in northern and rural areas.

Despite some instances of successful public-private sector collaboration, roundtable participants believe that bureaucratic restrictions severely limit this partnership. For example, the Government of Canada’s “common-look-and-feel” approach to their web pages makes it difficult for the private sector to design initiatives and content for the public sector. Strict rules require the government to make its web pages easy to navigate for all Canadians, including those with limited computer literacy. These rigid regulations on content and appearance often make it difficult for the public service and private sector to collaborate or to “experiment” with new designs and applications.

To remedy these concerns, roundtable participants suggested that the public sector should reconsider the rules that guide the government’s relationship with the private sector. As governments focus on reducing spending over the coming years, roundtable participants agreed that eliminating some e-government regulation will allow public-private partnerships to provide more innovative and low cost services.
Public Engagement

Over the last decade, Switzerland has utilized online forums to engage citizens, share news and discuss major policy issues. These online forums are available in multiple languages (German, French, Italian, and occasionally in Romansh and English), which give citizens the opportunity to “meet” and discuss important civic issues.

As Switzerland is quickly becoming a leader in online consultations, some roundtable participants noted that Canada is increasingly falling behind. To illustrate, while Canada uses e-tools and consultation hearings during the early stages of policy development, the latter stages are often shrouded by cabinet secrecy and carried out solely by civil servants. Switzerland’s inclusion of e-tools and online consultation processes during the entire policy formation lifecycle may need to be considered by Canadian policymakers to increase public engagement.

Despite this concern, roundtable participants suggested that the benefits and limitations of “online segregation” will have to be evaluated. Swiss and Canadian policymakers have become concerned that online forums may be grouping together those who face similar policy challenges or speak the same language. Under these circumstances a regional or linguistic, instead of national, dialogue may be occurring. Roundtable participants noted that this “segregation” could actually lead to less national dialogue among the public.

e-Democracy

Unlike most Western nations, Switzerland consistently uses direct democracy, specifically referendums, initiatives and elections, as an effective way to engage citizens in the civil affairs of the country. Beginning in 1998, Switzerland began to develop tools in electronic voting (“e-voting”) to ensure that all of its citizens could engage in elections and policymaking. By 2003, Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich had become the first Swiss cantons to launch pilot programs aimed at creating an e-voting infrastructure and e-voting was being successfully implemented at the communal level. The success of these pilot programs convinced the Swiss Federal Council to remove regulation and openly encourage all cantons to develop electronic voting programs. With federal support, the three programs developed in Geneva, Neuchâtel and Zurich have now been made available to 9 other cantons. The adoption of e-voting tools has allowed Switzerland to engage previously disenfranchised groups, such as the disabled and expatriate communities, who now use this technology to participate in elections, initiatives and referendums.

In Canada, federalism will also play a key role in how governments design their e-voting infrastructure. Currently, Canada has 14 electoral jurisdictions across federal, provincial and territorial jurisdictions that are all considering ways to utilize e-voting. According to roundtable participants, the key issue facing Canadian policy-makers is whether to develop a unique e-voting infrastructure in each jurisdiction or streamline a process across all 14 electoral bodies.
There is also a need to understand the key objectives of e-voting in order to evaluate whether success has been achieved. Roundtable participants agreed that while voting may become more “convenient” through the use of e-tools, this does not necessarily mean a corresponding increase in the number of people who cast a ballot. Recent elections in Switzerland provide one example to support this point. Despite having the option to cast a ballot electronically and by post, voter turnout in Switzerland has dropped as low as 40% during some elections. In a country that provides its citizens with many options to cast a ballot, roundtable participants noted that instances of low voter turnout may suggest that election issues are more important than convenience. It is important to note however, that Swiss citizens vote an average of 4 times per year through elections, referendums and initiatives so the level of civic engagement is likely much higher than the numbers might suggest.

International Models

While Switzerland and Canada are both leaders in providing e-government and e-democracy services, roundtable participants cited key examples where online tools are being adopted in other nations as well:

- **Estonia** is the only country to have launched remote internet voting nationally and plans to expand its system to allow citizens to vote by SMS text messaging. Having established government legislation, internal processes, and agencies to reinforce its national internet voting system, Estonia now boasts one of the most advanced electoral systems in the world.

- **The United Kingdom** has experimented with many different types of remote e-voting programs in an attempt to engage citizens and modernize its electoral system. While remote internet voting has largely been abandoned in the UK, many of the lessons learned from its pilot programs can be used to inform programs in other countries, including Switzerland and Canada.

- **Many African nations** have recently committed to improve government service delivery through information and communication technologies. The 5th Annual e-Governance Africa Forum, held in April 2011, aims to help inspire countries to improve policy, regulation and public-private transactions through electronic tools.

- **Wikileaks** is often seen as an extreme and controversial example that pushes the envelope on government transparency. Roundtable participants noted that as governments increase information-sharing through releasing reports, improving e-services and updating their websites, the impetus behind Wikileaks may alternate.
Security & Cost Issues

Certainly, security is a serious concern when using e-voting and e-governance tools. In Switzerland, additional security features have also been built into the current stage of the Swiss pilot programs, including a regulation that allows only 10% of the electorate to use e-voting programs during an election or referendum. Swiss officials are also currently carrying out quantitative studies in tandem with the e-voting pilot projects to determine levels of security. These regulations help limit the influence that a hacker could have on an election. As the public service becomes more confident in their security measures, steps will be taken to steadily increase the percentage of votes cast electronically.

Switzerland’s unique and decentralized approach to e-voting also provides an additional security feature. Since the Swiss cantons use 3 variations of e-voting and maintain their own unique technical systems, it is more difficult for hackers to falsify results or influence national elections.

In Canada, experiments in e-voting have largely taken place on a smaller scale. In an effort to reduce security threats and online fraud, some municipal pilot programs have given citizens pin numbers that expire after an individual casts a ballot. Furthermore, the private sector is also experimenting with tools to validate the voter’s identity, to ensure the protection of individual privacy and to prevent people from “selling votes.” Some Canadian financial institutions, for example, are currently using bank cards as a tool to identify voters, a process that is increasingly being embraced by the public as an effective option for casting votes. To date, these pilot programs have been largely successful.

Finally, the cost of creating, maintaining and staffing an electronic voting system may limit governments from expanding their e-voting programs. For example, Swiss cantons have often restricted the scope of their e-democracy and e-government services due to the associated high costs. While officials are taking steps to address the security and cost issues, roundtable participants suggested that these “limitations” may also be beneficial, acting as a brake to ensure that systems are not developed too hastily.

Conclusion

For over a decade, Switzerland and Canada have been leaders in delivering online government services and electronic voting. Driven by public demand, these services allow citizens to quickly access important information and programs; to engage in elections, referendums and policy consultations, and; to connect with elected representatives and the public service. By utilizing 21st century technology to connect with the citizenry, governments have been better positioned to capitalize on key opportunities and address ongoing challenges.

As demand for these vital services increases, governments will have to address issues that inhibit the speed and scope of e-government and e-democracy, specifically limitations on public-private partnerships and issues relating to security and cost. Despite these concerns, both Swiss and Canadian officials were confident that the work that is currently underway to resolve these unique challenges will help expand and improve e-government and e-democracy services.
# Appendix – List of Participants

## Moderators

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Organization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>His Excellency Werner Baumann</strong></td>
<td>Ambassador of Switzerland to Canada</td>
<td>The Swiss Confederation</td>
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<td><strong>Dr. Don Lenihan</strong></td>
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## Special Guest

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ms. Corina Casanova</strong></td>
<td>Federal Chancellor</td>
<td>The Swiss Confederation</td>
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## Roundtable Participants

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<td>Privy Council Office</td>
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<td>The Swiss Confederation</td>
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<td>Office of the Information Commissioner of Canada</td>
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<td><strong>Ms. Mary-Pat MacKinnon</strong></td>
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