

Falling voter turnout hurts democratic process: Canadian Chamber

Ottawa, September 24, 2009 – While the debate in Parliament continues about whether Canadians should be called to the polls for another federal general election, the third in five years, politicians of all parties need to think about how many Canadians will actually turn out to vote. In the last federal election, which cost taxpayers \$288.2 million, only 58.8% of eligible registered voters cast a ballot, a historic low. “Canada must make many vital decisions in coming years, yet growing numbers of citizens feel that their votes don’t matter. If we are truly interested in the health of our democracy, all of our political parties have to do more to earn Canadians’ respect,” says Canadian Chamber President and CEO Perrin Beatty.

The Economics of Elections, looks at the reasons behind the falling turnout, which contrasted with last year’s American Presidential election, where the highest percentage of US voters in the last forty years exercised their franchise. Top of the list is apathy about the process. Young Canadians in particular have the lowest voter turnout rate among all age brackets. The report says, “Perhaps our right as Canadian citizens to vote is a privilege that more and more young people are taking for granted.”

Unless we reverse this decline, the leaders we elect, and the policy positions adopted, will be determined by a declining percentage of the population, the report concludes.

The Canadian Chamber believes that governments, educators, parents and the private sector all have a role to play to motivate and engage Canadians, especially young people, in voting and other forms of civic engagement. “The election period is far too short to persuade young Canadians that voting is a worthwhile endeavor,” says Perrin Beatty, President and CEO of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce. “It’s a year round job, and the stakes in the next federal election are even higher than in previous years.”

Given the continuing economic uncertainty and market volatility, important issues like rising unemployment, growing protectionism, employment insurance reform, pension security, climate change, and potentially large cuts in government programs to balance the budget will all be on the government’s agenda in the year ahead. All Canadians need to take an interest in how the parties propose to deal with these issues.

The Canadian Chamber’s paper can be viewed at www.chamber.ca

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Contact:
Kathryn Anderson
Director, Communications and Marketing
Office: 613.238.4000 ext. 231
Cell: 613.797.1860
kanderson@chamber.ca