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## NEWS RELEASE

### *Votes of Urban Visible Minorities Are Worth Less Than Those of Other Canadians*

*Visible-minority vote dilution hurts efforts to integrate newcomers, and  
its underlying causes may violate the Charter rights of certain groups*

**Montreal** – To its benefit, Canada is a major destination for immigrants, particularly visible-minority immigrants. However, the IRPP study being released today reveals that the votes of urban visible minorities carry less weight than do those of other Canadians.

Authors Michael Pal and Sujit Choudhry (both from the University of Toronto Faculty of Law) take a new look at the fact that representation in the House of Commons is out of step with the changing demographic reality in Canada. The authors find that due to the underrepresentation in Parliament of Alberta, British Columbia and Ontario and the fact that most visible-minority immigrants are settling in the urban areas of these provinces, the votes of visible minority citizens are being diluted. This problematic situation potentially violates the Charter rights of urban visible minorities. More broadly, if Canada is to successfully integrate its visible-minority immigrants, its political institutions must provide fair representation.

Pal and Choudhry's analysis compares the relative worth of different types of votes in Canada in 1996 and 2001. They begin with the premise that the value of a vote in Canada is 1. However, when factoring in the weight of rural votes versus urban votes and the votes of urban visible minorities, things stack up differently:

- ◆ In 1996, the value of a rural vote in federal elections was 1.15, compared with 0.96 for all urban visible-minority votes. In short, votes of visible-minority citizens living in urban ridings were worth 17 percent less than their rural counterparts.
- ◆ By 2001, urban visible-minority voters had seen the value of their votes decline to 0.91, while the value of the votes of all urban voters was virtually unchanged at 0.96 and that of rural voters increased to 1.22. Vote dilution among visible minorities thus worsened relative to both rural and urban voters, essentially due to the fact that visible minorities tend to cluster in urban ridings that already have relatively large numbers of voters.

Given this clustering pattern, and the fact that the Conservative government is planning to grant citizenship to many immigrants currently considered permanent residents, the problem of urban visible-minority vote dilution is likely to worsen.

- ◆ Testing future scenarios, Pal and Choudhry found that if all permanent residents of voting age in 2001 had in fact been citizens, an urban visible-minority vote would have been worth 33 percent less than a rural vote.

The authors also warn that some of the rules and practices giving rise to visible-minority vote dilution may violate section 15 of the Charter. One could, the authors say, “challenge the constitutionality of the decisions of boundary commissions,” as well as “the relevant sections of the *Electoral Boundary Readjustment Act (EBRA)*.”

Pal and Choudhry propose three reform options to help empower urban visible minorities:

- ◆ Increase the size of the House of Commons to 327 members to accommodate population growth in BC, Alberta and Ontario.
- ◆ Amend existing legislation such as the *EBRA* and provincial legislation so that ridings vary less in population size.
- ◆ Bring more pressure to bear on the electoral boundary commissions, which determine the sizes of ridings to promote voter equality.

*Is Every Ballot Equal? Visible Minority Vote Dilution in Canada*, by Michael Pal and Sujit Choudhry, can be downloaded free from [www.irpp.org](http://www.irpp.org)

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