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NEWS RELEASE

IRPP Study Illustrates Enthusiasm but Lack of Consensus Over Democratic Reform Among Political Elites

Conservatives at odds with other parties and the public on how to strengthen Canadian democracy

Montreal – Reforming democratic institutions is a hot topic in Canadian political discourse and, according to the new prime minister, it will figure prominently in his initial legislative agenda. In light of these facts, the IRPP today released a study examining the views of candidates in the 2004 federal election on everything from electoral reform to the balance of power between the judiciary and parliament and the representation of women and visible minorities in Parliament.

The authors of this wide-ranging study, Jerome H. Black (McGill University) and Bruce M. Hicks (Université de Montréal), surveyed candidates from the Liberal Party, Conservative Party, New Democratic Party, Bloc Québécois and Green Party and then compared the findings with the views of the general public. The result illustrates where parties are out of sync with the views of Canadians on matters related to democratic reform and where disparities between parties occur on these issues.

On the subject of differences across party lines, Black and Hicks found that “in many cases the views of Conservative candidates were in stark contrast to those of candidates from the other parties.”

Findings illustrating this gap between the Conservative candidates and those from other parties include:

- ◆ A remarkable 86 percent of Conservatives said that Parliament should be the final arbiter on constitutional questions, whereas majorities in all the other parties felt this was the purview of the courts.
- ◆ Over 75 percent of Conservative candidates did not feel the under-representation of women in Parliament was a serious problem. Conversely, a majority of candidates from all the other parties felt that it was a serious problem.
- ◆ Eighty percent of Conservative candidates did not feel the under-representation of visible minorities in Parliament was a serious problem, which put them at odds with all other parties except the Liberals, who were divided.

The authors found an appetite for a number of other initiatives pertaining to democratic reform:

- ◆ There was overwhelming support from Conservative, Bloc, Green and NDP candidates for the idea of fixed election dates, while the Liberals were divided on this issue.
- ◆ NDP and Green candidates strongly favoured a move to proportional representation. While Conservative, Bloc and Liberal candidates opposed the idea of PR, they did not oppose it strongly.

When comparing the views of candidates with the views of the general public, the authors offer two observations:

- ◆ From the perspective of commonality between the views of candidates and members of the general public, Black and Hicks found that “NDP candidates, followed by those from the Green Party and the Bloc Québécois, were most frequently and most ardently on the side of public opinion.”
- ◆ Taking another vantage point, the authors examined which party had internal divisions that most closely mimic the divisions of the general public. From this view, the Liberal Party was most in sync with Canadians.

“From either perspective, Conservative candidates tended to be most at odds with public opinion,” note Black and Hicks in their conclusion.

“Strengthening Canadian Democracy: The Views of Parliamentary Candidates” by Jerome H. Black and Bruce M. Hicks is the latest study in the IRPP’s “Strengthening Canadian Democracy” research program. It and others in the series are now available on-line in Adobe (.pdf) format on the Institute’s Web site (www.irpp.org)

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