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NEWS RELEASE

Political Dropout Rate Among Youth in Canada is Acute Problem

IRPP study says poor political knowledge is to blame and proposes ways to redress it.

*Institute for
Research on
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Montreal – In the context of lacklustre participation rates in recent elections in British Columbia and Labrador, a new study released today by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP.org) reveals that nonvoting by young people is an especially acute problem in Canada. Less than 40 percent of potential first-time voters turned out for the 2004 federal election, a lower proportion than their older compatriots and their peers in nearly all comparable countries.

Of particular concern to Henry Milner, an IRPP visiting fellow and author of the study, are “political dropouts” -- young citizens inattentive to the political landscape and lacking the knowledge needed to choose among parties and candidates -- who constitute a growing group in democracies.

“The real threat to democracy,” argues Milner, “lies not in young citizens choosing not to vote, but in their lack of the basic knowledge and skills required to make that choice on an informed basis.”

Milner stresses the urgent need to bolster civic education and reform democratic institutions to combat youth voter apathy. “I am not convinced that youth abstention is an expression of the ‘good judgment of young people on the failings of political elites’ any more than I believe that ‘democracy is best served if the ignorant abstain.’”

The author notes that in Canada the provinces, because of their constitutional powers in these areas, are best positioned to implement his proposals, which include:

Educational reforms:

- ◆ Keep young people in school long enough to acquire the skills and habits of literacy that will help them to take their place in society as adults.
- ◆ Offer civics courses to students beginning at age 15 or 16.
- ◆ Maximize the benefits of civic-education by reducing the voting age to 16. Such a move will help first-time voters ease into voting habitually and responsibly before the ages of 18 to 20, a period of transition.
- ◆ Ensure that civic education gives importance to the positions taken by the different parties on local, regional and national issues, and have the parties themselves present their positions.
- ◆ Complement civics courses with activities designed to establish habits of citizenship (such as mock elections) among young people as they reach voting age.

Institutional reforms:

- ◆ Adopt a proportional representation (PR) electoral system. By giving small parties that have distinct principle-based positions and that carry some measure of popular support a better chance of having democratically elected representatives, PR fosters political expression, from parliaments right down to the civics classroom.
- ◆ Set a fixed voting day, which would allow organizers of civic-education courses, mock elections and other activities that encourage youth voting to plan their programs well in advance.

The bottom line, says Milner, is that the “main focus of civic-education-related measures should be placed on promoting the habit of attentiveness to political information.” He believes that if well carried out, these measures could have a significant effect in redressing political dropout rates.

“Are Young Canadians Becoming Political Dropouts? A Comparative Perspective” is the latest *IRPP Choices* study released as part of the Institute’s Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program. It is available on the IRPP Web site, at www.irpp.org.

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Founded in 1972, the Institute for Research in Public Policy (IRPP.org) is an independent, national, nonprofit organization based in Montreal.

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