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NEWS RELEASE

Elections Canada's Permanent Voters List: Modernizing Initiative is Contributing to Lower Voter Turnout

"Registration regimes should operate to uphold the key democratic principle of facilitating the participation of all citizens," maintains Jerome H. Black, author of a new IRPP study

Montreal – In a study released today by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), Jerome H. Black says that the new permanent-list system, which replaced the door-to-door enumeration carried out before every election, has had a “debilitating impact on voter turnout” and has increased inequalities in participation across social groups.

In the study, entitled “From Enumeration to the National Register of Electors: An Account and an Evaluation,” Black, a professor of political science at McGill University, highlights the pivotal and proactive roles of Elections Canada and the chief electoral officer in achieving the change, stating that “if Elections Canada was at the centre of the process of bringing about a switch, Kingsley was its epicentre.”

The author argues that a “culture of technology” motivated the reforms. He states that Elections Canada actively pushed for a new registration system following the auditor general’s report, which “sharply criticized the agency’s sluggishness in embracing new technology.” Black provides a thorough analysis of the factors leading to the changeover and emphasizes the prevailing atmosphere of electoral reform, which Kingsley and Elections Canada tactically capitalized on “to seize the initiative in advocating on behalf of a register.” He describes the deployment of “an effective selling strategy that stressed the technical and economic feasibility of a permanent list,” which appealed to the political interests of both the government and the main opposition parties.

While these efforts proved successful, Black’s study reveals, the instigators of the reform paid limited attention to the impact of the new registration system on electoral participation. Although some have attempted to dismiss the suggestion that the “new record [set in 2000] for the worst turnout ever documented in a federal election” can be partly attributed to the permanent register, Black provides strong statistical and qualitative evidence of the new system’s inhibiting effect on voter participation. He also finds that it “has accentuated participation gaps across social groups,” pointing out that poorer individuals and young people are disproportionately affected. Says Black, “Evidence of these negative effects is strongest and most certain in the 2000 election, where the National Register had its first full test.”

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The author concludes that we should consider “the incorporation of enumeration-like activities in order to balance the registration approach [and] address the coverage inequalities that seem almost inherent in the current system.” Acknowledging that this would add to the cost of the program, he states that it is a “trade-off that must accompany any kind of serious commitment to facilitating participation.”

“From Enumeration to the National Register of Electors: An Account and an Evaluation,” is the latest *Choices* study to be released as part of the IRPP’s Strengthening Canadian Democracy series. It is now available on-line in Adobe (.pdf) format on the Institute’s Web site (www.irpp.org). Please find the summary attached.

IRPP’s Strengthening Canadian Democracy research program explores some of the democratic lacunae in Canada’s political system by focusing on how the legitimacy of our system of government can be strengthened before disengagement from politics and public alienation accelerate unduly. Please visit the Institute’s Web site for more information regarding this program or to download studies published since it was launched.

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For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact the IRPP.

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