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NEWS RELEASE

Younger Canadians Disengaging from Canadian Democracy at Increasing Rates

The most worrying trend in Canadian democracy is the increased disengagement from traditional politics among younger Canadians, a trend unlikely to be reversed as they age, says Dr. Brenda O'Neill, assistant professor of political studies at the University of Manitoba.

Today, the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP) releases "Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians: Separating the Wheat from the Chaff." The 48-page study explores questions of generational differences in the political attitudes and behaviour of Canadians.

Looking at attitudinal changes between 1990 and 2000, the author identifies a mix of effects rooted in some characteristics unique to this generation, and others spanning several, as well as broad-based trends related to the health of Canadian democracy:

Generational effects: Today's younger Canadians are participating less in both elections and in political parties than did previous generations at that age. This increasing political disengagement among younger Canadians is most worrying because it is unlikely to be reversed as they age, according Professor O'Neill.

Life-cycle effects: As Canadians age they develop a greater interest in politics and become increasingly likely to participate in political parties, but this is accompanied by a host of increasingly negative political evaluations. For example, older Canadians have a greater sense of political inefficacy, increased cynicism regarding political parties and the role of money in elections, and less satisfaction with democracy, elections and the electoral system.

Period effects between 1990 and 2000: Evidence that the more negative opinions expressed by older Canadians on a number of issues is due partly to the effects of aging suggests a natural cycle of opinion that Canadians of all generations move through. But these results are overshadowed by findings of changing opinion and behaviour among all Canadians over the period, pointing to a decreased willingness to accept the electoral system's distorting effects, increased cynicism regarding the influence of money in politics, and heightened dissatisfaction with the choice provided by existing political parties.

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What do these results signify for the future of Canadian democracy? For Brenda O'Neill, "If the legitimacy of a democratic political system rests on the number of citizens who participate in its elections, then Canadian democracy is in some danger."

The author concludes that Canadian governments would do well to address these findings, both by increasing dialogue with Canadians and by implementing measures designed to increase political participation among Canadian youth. The latter might prove more difficult, however, as withdrawal from politics among younger Canadians seems to originate more in political apathy than in political disaffection. This requires the federal and provincial governments make a concerted effort to convince young Canadians of the importance and the necessity of their participation in the democratic process. It is a significant undertaking, but one that is crucial to maintaining the vitality of Canadian democracy.

"Generational Patterns in the Political Opinions and Behaviour of Canadians: Separating the Wheat from the Chaff," the latest *Policy Matters* paper in IRPP's *Strengthening Canadian Democracy* series, is now available on the IRPP website at www.irpp.org – simply click on the "What's New" icon on the homepage.

For more information, or to schedule an interview with Brenda O'Neill, please contact IRPP.

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