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For immediate distribution
November 27, 2007

NEWS RELEASE

Compulsory Voting Does Not Lead to a More Informed Electorate

Though penalizing those who do not vote will increase turnout, Canada must develop a more innovative approach to engaging its citizens, particularly the youth

Montreal – Apathy in politics is becoming a significant problem in Canada. The percentage turnout in federal elections has been declining since the 1980s and has now reached the low sixties. It is even lower among youth, among whom the proportion voting recently hit a low of 38 percent. This has led to calls for compulsory voting, which some view as having the added benefit of increasing political knowledge. However, as the IRPP study being released today argues, you can make voters go to the polls, but doing so is not likely to breed better informed or more engaged citizens.

In this study authors Henry Milner, Peter John Loewen and Bruce M. Hicks (all of Université de Montréal) test whether compulsory voting increases political knowledge in a unique experiment involving college students who were eligible to vote in the 2007 Quebec election. They asked two groups of students to complete two surveys (the first before the election and the second after the election). One group, however, was told they would only receive their remuneration if they voted. The latter was the test group for compulsory voting, as that system sometimes includes a financial incentive to vote. The idea was to verify three hypotheses: Would those who had a financial incentive to vote 1) learn more about politics in general; 2) discuss politics more frequently, and 3) follow the news more assiduously; than those who did not have the financial incentive. The authors found no difference in the behaviour or political knowledge of the two groups.

The findings of this study should give pause to those who view compulsory voting as a panacea for the declining levels of civic engagement and political knowledge. However, Milner, Loewen and Hicks point out their analysis is not a case against compulsory voting. Clearly there is strong evidence to support the fact that compulsory voting leads to higher turnout. The question is, how informed is the citizen who is compelled to vote? The authors' negative findings on this question "place the ball in the court of the advocates of compulsory voting."

"The Paradox of Compulsory Voting: Participation Does Not Equal Political Knowledge," by Henry Milner, Peter John Loewen and Bruce M. Hicks, can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org

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