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NEWS RELEASE

Fixed Election Dates Key Element in Addressing Voter Cynicism and Low Turnout

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Montreal – As Canadians prepare to trudge through the snow to cast their ballots in the second federal election in less than two years, a study published today by the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP.org) argues that adoption of fixed election dates is a key element in a comprehensive strategy to address low voter turnout and cynicism.

Author Henry Milner (IRPP Visiting Scholar and professor of political science at Laval University) shows that Canada is among only 12 of 40 comparable democracies that does not use some form of fixed election dates.

These numbers contradict the widely held misperception that flexible election dates are incompatible with parliamentary systems. In fact, most parliamentary democracies in Scandinavia and continental Europe – including several with Westminster-style systems – have “flexible-fixed” systems, in which election dates are statutorily set, but provisions exist for holding early elections if necessary.

Adopting fixed election dates is “a win-win proposition” according to the author, because it will lead to more responsible governments, reduced elections costs, more fairness, and improved confidence in the political process. He points out that British Columbia has already adopted fixed election dates, and a similar law is currently being debated in Ontario.

“The weight of the foregoing arguments at the very least places the burden of proof on those who would retain the system of unfixed election dates,” says Milner. And public-opinion polls routinely show that Canadians overwhelmingly favour fixed election dates over the status quo.

Milner notes that fixed voting dates are a necessary, but not sufficient, condition to address increasing cynicism among Canadians (particularly young voters), which has caused voter turnout in federal elections to plummet from 75 percent in 1988 to 61 percent in 2004. Fixed voting dates would facilitate organization of civic education programs, mock elections and other tools with a proven track record of boosting turnout. Furthermore, the fact that the party in power would no longer dictate election timing would in and of itself reduce voter cynicism.

The author makes a series of recommendations for adopting fixed election dates for the House of Commons and the provincial legislatures, including:

- ◆ Adopting a precise date (as British Columbia has done), preferably in early fall so that the campaign would take place at the end of the traditional vacation season, when Parliament is not in session. Elections would thus coincide with the beginning of the “political season.”

- ◆ Building in provisions for holding early elections when necessary and, in such an event, stipulating that the following election will occur on the designated date four calendar years later.

"Fixing Canada's Unfixed Election Dates: A 'Political Season' to Reduce the Democratic Deficit" is the latest *IRPP Policy Matters* 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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Contact:

Jeremy Leonard (jleonard@irpp.org)
Senior Fellow, Policy Outreach (IRPP.org)
Office: (514) 985-2461, ext. 323, or cellular: (514) 235-8308