



Institute for
Research on
Public Policy

Institut de
recherche
en politiques
publiques

For immediate distribution
November 9, 2006

NEWS RELEASE

Inequities in Voter Turnout and Political Representation in Post-merger Toronto Present a "Disturbing" Problem

*"Overwhelming" benefits of incumbency reduce chances for visible
minorities in particular, says Bruce Hicks*

Montreal – On November 13, the citizens of the megacity of Toronto head to the polls to elect their municipal government. In light of this, the IRPP is today releasing a study that shows that specific groups – most notably low-income individuals and visible minorities -- are much less likely to vote, which results in the underrepresentation of those populations on City Council.

Author Bruce Hicks (Université de Montréal), examines municipal elections in Toronto before and after the merger that created the megacity. His findings show that visible minorities, people with lower incomes and renters are significantly less likely to vote in municipal elections than other groups. This, coupled with the fact that incumbency gives candidates a distinct electoral advantage, creates a situation whereby the aforementioned groups – particularly visible minorities – are underrepresented on City Council. Given that 40 percent of Torontonians are visible minorities (expected to increase to over 50 percent in the next decade), the author notes that such inequities cast suspicion on the legitimacy of the government.

Contrary to expectations, overall voter turnout rose in the 1997 election, immediately following the merger, but has declined in every subsequent election. More importantly, Hicks' data show that socioeconomic factors are strongly correlated with voter turnout in recent municipal elections:

- ◆ Turnout was significantly higher in wards with a greater proportion of high-income earners and more university-educated residents.
- ◆ Similarly, turnout was negatively correlated with the unemployment rate in each ward.
- ◆ In wards with proportionately greater immigrant populations and visible minorities, turnout was significantly lower.

The author's findings also show that incumbent candidates have been increasingly successful in each election since the merger in 1997. When coupled with low voter turnout among those with lower incomes and among visible minorities, the overwhelming benefits of incumbency create a situation where certain groups are underrepresented on City Council.

To address the related problems of low voter turnout, the primacy of incumbents and the underrepresentation of minorities, Hicks proposes several prescriptions, among which are the following:

- ◆ **The introduction of compulsory voting, or voters' incentives.** Hicks points out that "In over 30 countries where some form of compulsory voting is in place, voting turnout is on average higher and significantly higher for provincial and local elections." An alternative would be to encourage voting by offering voters a tax credit or paid leave on election day.
- ◆ **Have national or provincial political parties operate at the municipal level.** In addition to bringing a recognizable brand name to the table, "political parties often have ready-made workers in the form of party members who will actively support candidates running under the party label," says the author.
- ◆ **Decouple the electoral list from the tax rolls.** Under the current set-up, homeowners have the advantage of being pre-registered to vote and personally informed, through mailings, on where to vote. This, says Hicks, "leaves the system in the hands of the wealthy landowners."

Are Marginalized Communities Disenfranchised? Voter Turnout and Representation in Post-merger Toronto, by Bruce Hicks, can be downloaded free of charge from www.irpp.org

-30-

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

To receive the Institute's monthly newsletter via e-mail, please subscribe to the IRPP e-distribution service by visiting its Web site, at www.irpp.org.

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

Contact:

Jackson Wightman (jwightman@irpp.org)
Director of Communications (IRPP)
Office: (514) 985-2461, ext. 324
Cellular: (514) 235-8308