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Georgians' Low Opinion of Public Officials' Ethics Could Affect Citizen Involvement in State and Local Governance

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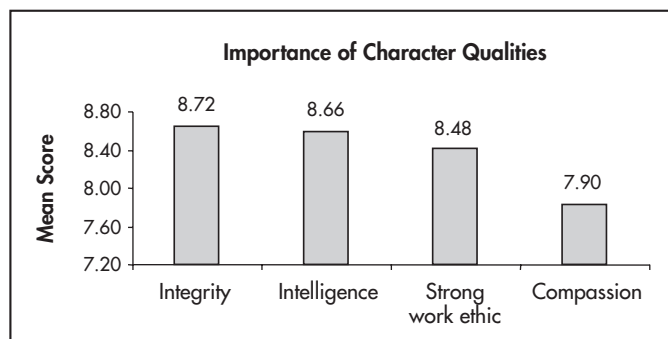
The data presented in this report are taken from a Peach State Poll conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government between June 10 and June 17, 2002. The poll included 801 telephone interviews of randomly selected adults in Georgia. For a sample of this size, the margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level is +/- 3.5 percent.

Respondents rated integrity highest among character qualities they would like their elected officials to possess.

In the October preceding the 2000 presidential election, an NBC–*Wall Street Journal* Poll asked registered voters to list the top one or two issues that would determine how they would vote. Education and health care were most often cited, followed by the moral and ethical standards of the candidates (cited by 26 percent of all respondents). In a Georgia public opinion poll, respondents rated integrity highest among character qualities they would like their elected officials to possess (Carl Vinson Institute of Government 2002) (see the figure). Poll after poll has shown that character and ethics matter to voters and to the public generally.

There is no evidence to substantiate that today's government officials are less ethical than those of previous generations, despite popular discontent with ethics in government. In fact, a recent National Conference of State Legislatures report notes that today's legislators are more ethical than they were in earlier times and that ethical standards for government officials are more stringent today than they have been at any time in the past. The increase in the number of states with ethics policies, committees, and commissions reflects the growing public demand for higher standards and for legislators to recognize "that they need to confront the appearance of conflicts of interest between their private and public duties" (Center for Ethics in Government 2002, 1).

In Georgia, a number of stories have appeared this year in the major newspapers calling into question the ethical behavior of some of the state's most prominent officials. Although the allegations in many of these cases have not led to any censure or criminal proceedings, the sheer number of stories has led pundits to postulate an ethical crisis in the state. But what does the public think about the ethics of government officials, and what impact does public opinion about ethics have on democracy in the state?



Note: Elected officials rated each quality on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being extremely important and 1 being not at all important.

The June 2002 Peach State Poll found that over two-thirds (69 percent) of respondents believe that ethics in government is a greater problem today than it was in the past. Of those who believe that ethics is a greater problem today, 62 percent agreed with the following statement: "Ethics in government is a greater problem today because we are more aware of abuses of power than we were in the past." Only 34 percent of this group (20 percent of the total sample) believes that ethics is a greater problem because elected officials are less honest today than they were in the past.

On the other hand, 26 percent of the Georgians surveyed do not believe that ethics in government is a greater problem today—but not necessarily because they consider government officials to be honest. On the contrary, three-quarters of this group (20 percent of the total sample) agree with the notion that government officials have never behaved honestly, only that we know more today about their transgressions due to increased media exposure. Only 22 percent of those who do not believe that ethics in government is a greater problem today (6 percent of the total sample) also believe that today's government officials are basically honest.

Furthermore, most Georgians (53 percent) also believe that government officials should be held to a higher ethical standard than should people in the business community. Self-described conservatives are more likely to hold government officials to a higher standard than are liberals (58 percent versus 48 percent), and women are slightly more likely than men to believe that elected officials should be held to higher standards.

Respondents also indicated that most people who go into politics do so for personal gain (59 percent) rather than to serve the public (27 percent). Lower-income respondents tend to be even more cynical; only 18 percent of those respondents whose household income is less than \$20,000 per year believe that most people go into politics out of a real desire to serve the public. Some scholars believe that this cynicism is one of the causal factors explaining why people with low incomes are less likely to vote than are those with higher incomes (see Patterson 2002).

Overall, these data show that the public's perception of the ethics of government officials is disturbingly low. Whether or not that assessment is warranted is unclear, as is the potential impact of this perception on the health of democracy in the state. The most likely effect is that public cynicism is connected to low voter turnout and a continuing decline in civic participation. Scholars and journalists have established a link between cynicism and withdrawal from civic engagement (see Patterson 2002), and public opinion data on the subject have generally provided evidence in support of this linkage (Putnam 2000). In light of these findings from national studies, the poll data from Georgia should serve as a warning that government officials in Georgia are losing the perception battle. A likely victim in this battle could very well be civic involvement in state and local governance.

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