

A Report on the Attitudes of Georgians Related to the Separation of Church and State

Americans generally accept the separation between church and state as a principle, but the interpretation of this ideal can be hotly contested. The first amendment to the U.S. Constitution states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” In other words, the government is not permitted to favor any one faith at the expense of others or to restrict the exercise of religion. This amendment has helped secure the independent role of religion in this country.

Polls show that the American public prefers a secular government to one guided by religion. A plurality (49 percent) of likely voters told pollsters during the 2000 presidential election that they do not want elected officials to be guided by their religious values when making policy decisions.¹ Historically, Americans have preferred as their leaders people of faith but policies and actions guided by secular laws. The concern among many during the 1960 Presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy was that a Catholic president may be too readily influenced by the Vatican.

One effect of the separation of church and state in America has been to make Americans the most religious people in the developed world. Religious organizations, able to stand aloof from secular politics and not tainted by inextricable ties to government, stay above the fray of secular banalities. As such, Americans seek refuge from such secular compromises in their faith communities. A recent Gallup Poll confirms the role of religion in the life of Americans.

Roughly 6 in 10 U.S. adults told Gallup in a Nov. 10-12 survey that religion is “very important” in their own lives, close to two-thirds say they are a member of a church or synagogue, and more than 4 in 10 say they attended a church or synagogue in the past week. There has been only slight variation in these figures over the past two decades, and the current figures are generally in line with Gallup's religion trends over this period.²

Religion is even more important to southerners in the U.S. than to the rest of the country, according to that Gallup Poll. Seventy-three percent of southerners say religion is very important in their lives, compared with 60 percent of midwesterners, 56 percent of those from the East, and 50 percent of those from the western states.³ Thus, we can expect that Georgians’ attitudes about the role of religion in the state will differ from the nation as a whole, and a recent Peach State Poll (November 2003) bears that expectation out. When we compare attitudes and opinions of Georgians with a national sample, we find that Georgians are less concerned about separating government from religion than is the country in general.

¹ From a poll conducted cooperatively by the Tarrance Group and Lake, Snell, Perry, & Associates, March 12-March 13, 2000, and are based on telephone interviews with a national registered likely voters sample of 1,000. Likely voters are registered voters who said they are somewhat/very/extremely likely to vote in the Congressional and Presidential elections in 2000.

² Saad, Lydia, “Religion Is Very Important to Majority of Americans,” *Poll Analysis*, December 5, 2003. www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr031205.asp.

³ Ibid.

Whereas 29 percent of Americans disapprove of displaying the Ten Commandments in a government building, only 18 percent of Georgians disapprove. Georgians are also much less likely to disapprove of nondenominational prayer at a public school ceremony than are Americans in general (14 percent compared with 21 percent). While Georgians are predominantly Christian, they are still less likely to oppose the display of a verse from the Koran in a public building than is the rest of America (51 percent versus 64 percent).⁴

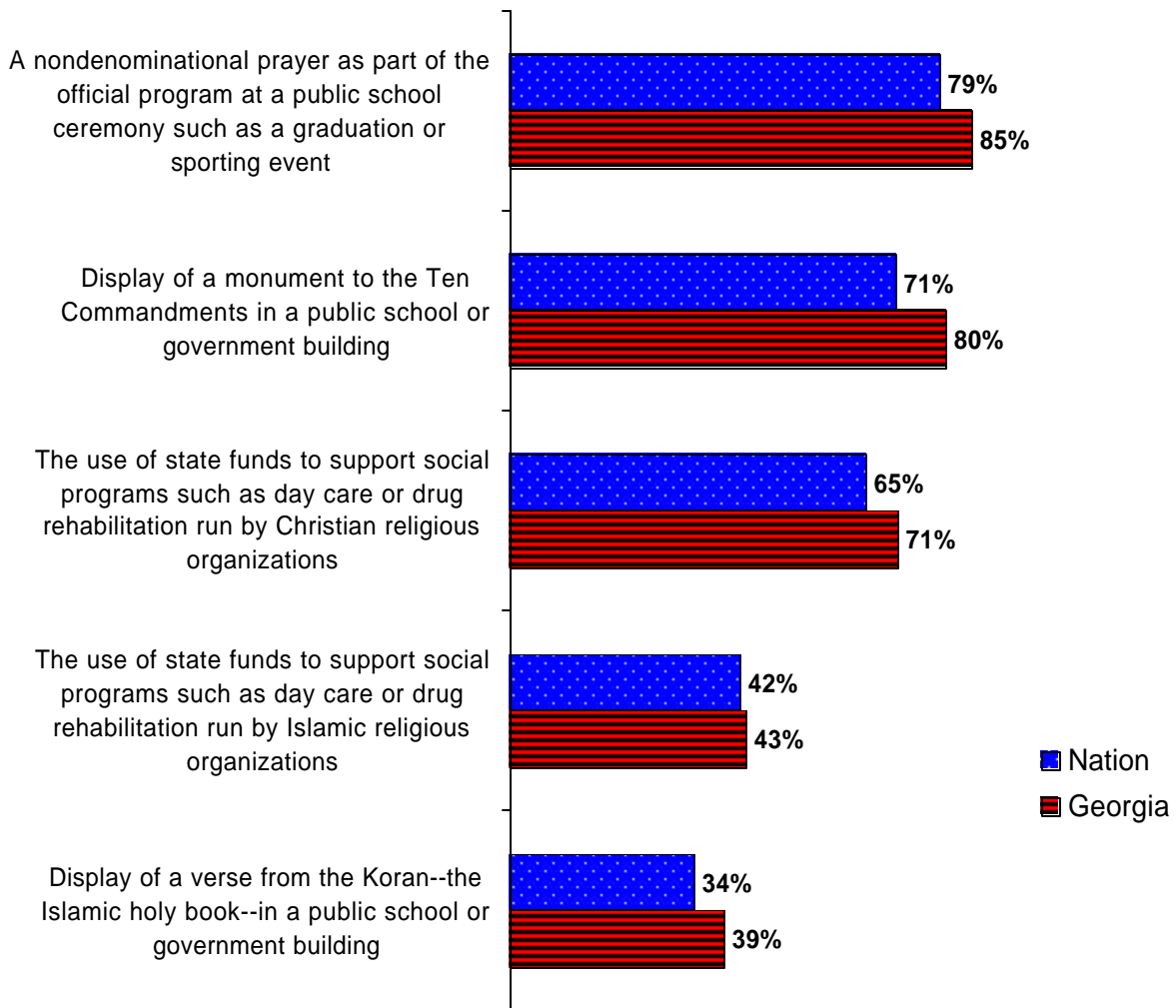
It is important to note that the Gallup Poll of Americans and the Peach State Poll of Georgians employed slightly different interview strategies in gathering public opinion data. Although the statements were worded identically, Peach State Poll respondents were not pressured to either agree or disagree with the statements; consequently, many respondents took a neutral stance on the statements, which was not an option in the Gallup Poll.⁵ In order to compare the two polls, the following graph standardizes the data by showing responses for each item only of those who took an “agree-disagree” stance on the item. What the data show is that on all items, Georgians are more open to mixing religion and government than are Americans in general.

It is worth noting that both Americans and Georgians are more supportive of using state funds for social programs run by Islamic organizations than they are of displaying a verse from the Koran in a government building. On the other hand, the public is more supportive of displaying the Ten Commandments in a government building than funding social programs run by Christian organizations.

⁴ The data from the national sample are taken from a Gallup/CNN/USA Today poll conducted by the Gallup Organization, September 19-September 21, 2003, and are based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,003. This data was provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

⁵ There is good reason to employ a strategy that omits a neutral response. Such an omission forces respondents to take a position; thus, researchers learn more about propensities and leanings. The absence of a neutral response, on the other hand, presents the possibility that researchers measure opinion that in fact does not exist.

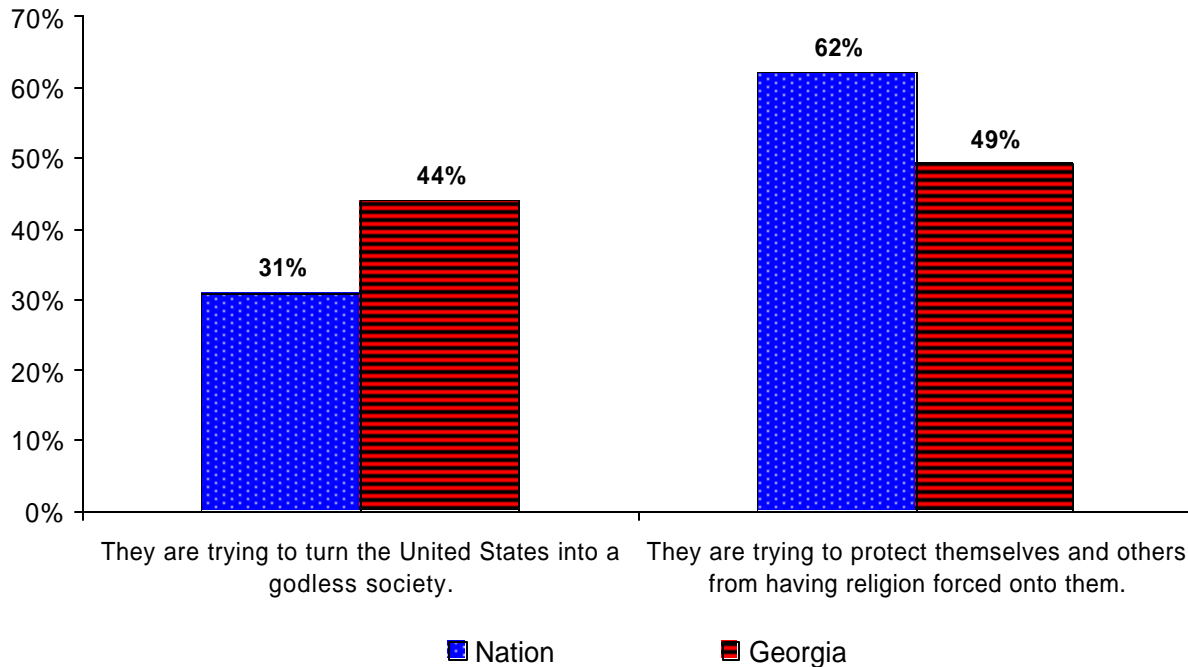
Percent Expressing Approval (percent of those taking a position)



In addition to being more supportive of mixing religion and the state, Georgians are less tolerant of those who file lawsuits against such mixing in any fashion. While a slight plurality of Georgians (49 percent) believe that the lawsuits are an attempt to keep religion from being forced upon them, this percentage falls far short of the 62 percent of the national sample that share this view. Forty-four percent of Georgians believe that the people filing such lawsuits are trying to turn the nation into a godless society, compared with 31 percent of a national sample.⁶

⁶ These data from the national sample are taken from the same poll as above conducted by the Gallup Organization, September 19-September 21, 2003, and are based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,003. This data was provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Which comes closer to your view of why some people file lawsuits opposing such things as prayer in public schools or displays of religious symbols in government buildings?

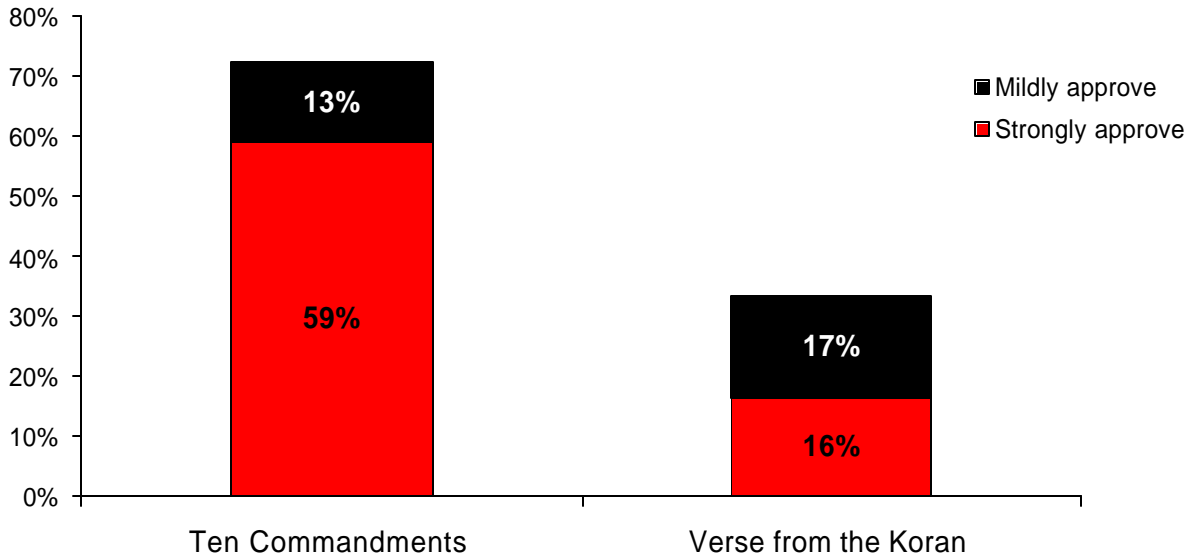


Consistent with these findings, Georgians are more likely than the average American to favor spirituality having a greater influence in politics and public life than it does now. Whereas only 43 percent of a national sample would rather see spirituality have greater influence, 52 percent of Georgians favor greater influence.⁷

Like the rest of the nation, Georgians are more supportive of mixing the state with Christianity than with Islam. When asked to what degree they support the display of the Ten Commandments in a public building, 59 percent strongly approve and another 13 percent mildly approve; on the other hand, only 16 percent strongly approve of the display of a verse from the Koran in a government building, and another 17 percent mildly approve.

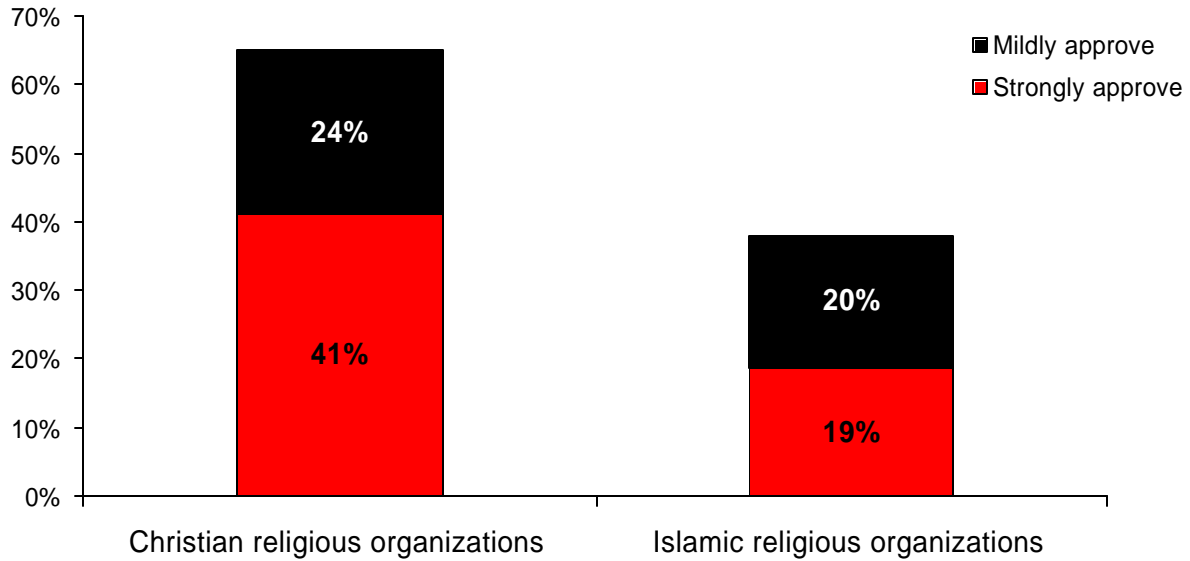
⁷ The data from the national poll on spirituality in public life come from the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, June 4-June 9, 2003 and are based on telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,015. This data was provided by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut.

Georgians Support for the Display of Religious Symbols in Government Buildings



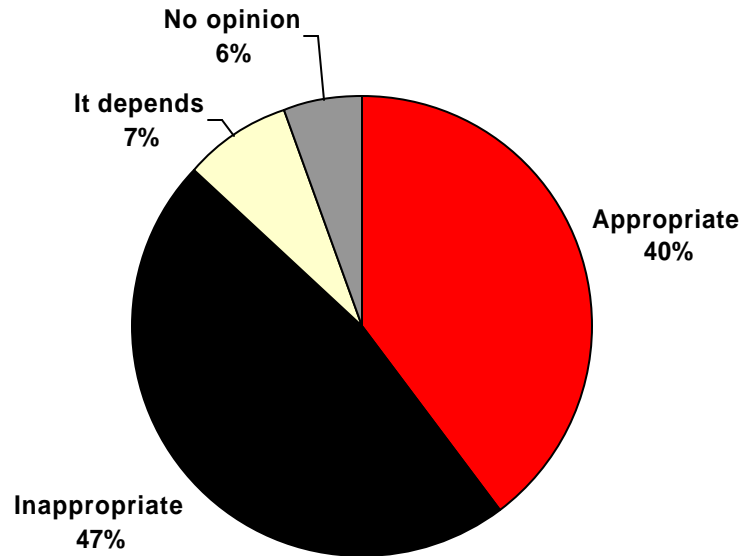
Georgians are also more likely to support the use of state funds for social programs such as day care or drug rehabilitation run by Christian groups than those run by Islamic groups. The reticence to support state funding of programs run by Islamic groups may not simply be due to the fact that the public is largely Christian; the aftermath of 9-11 may have some bearing on this response. Despite admonitions by our country’s leaders to refrain from associating Islam with terrorism, many who are not familiar with the teachings of the Koran have made this association. Thus, the funding of Islamic groups may be confused by some in the general public to the funding of potential terrorist organizations.

Support for the Use of State Funds for Social Programs Run by ...



In general, however, a slim plurality of Georgians believes it is inappropriate to use state funds to support social programs run by faith-based organizations. When we asked this question without reference to any faith, only two in five Georgians (40 percent) said it was appropriate to use taxpayer money to fund such programs; this figure is about equal to the percent of Georgians who approve of using state funds, but there is a disconnect between the two questions. Just less than a third of those who approve of using state funds for these programs (31 percent) also believe it is inappropriate. It is likely that the “appropriateness” pertains to their understanding of the law, whereas their approval or disapproval reflects their opinion of what the law should be.

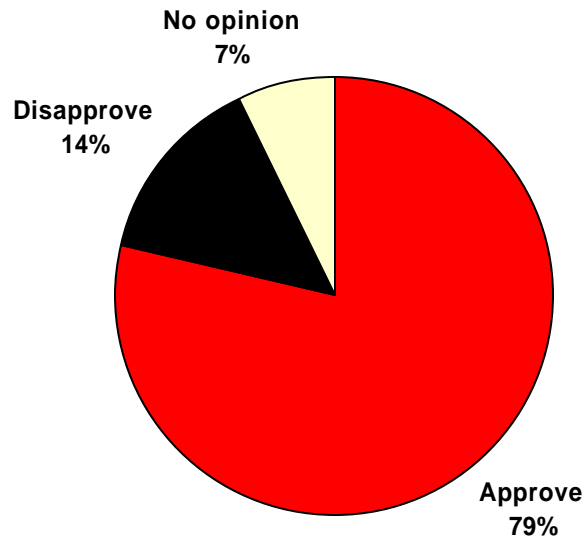
In general, do you believe it is appropriate or inappropriate to use taxpayer money to fund social programs run by faith-based organizations?



Very few Georgians disapprove of allowing a nondenominational prayer at a public school ceremony, such as a graduation or sporting event; 15 percent say they disapprove, with 10 percent of that saying they strongly disapprove. Seventy-nine percent, however, either strongly approve (62 percent) or mildly approve (16 percent) of permitting such a prayer.⁸ In addition, very few Georgians agree with those who would like to see the words “one nation under God” stricken from the pledge of allegiance; in fact, 80 percent of Georgians completely disagree with removing the reference to God, and another 7 percent somewhat disagree. Only 11 percent of Georgians agree with those who would like to remove the reference to God from the pledge.

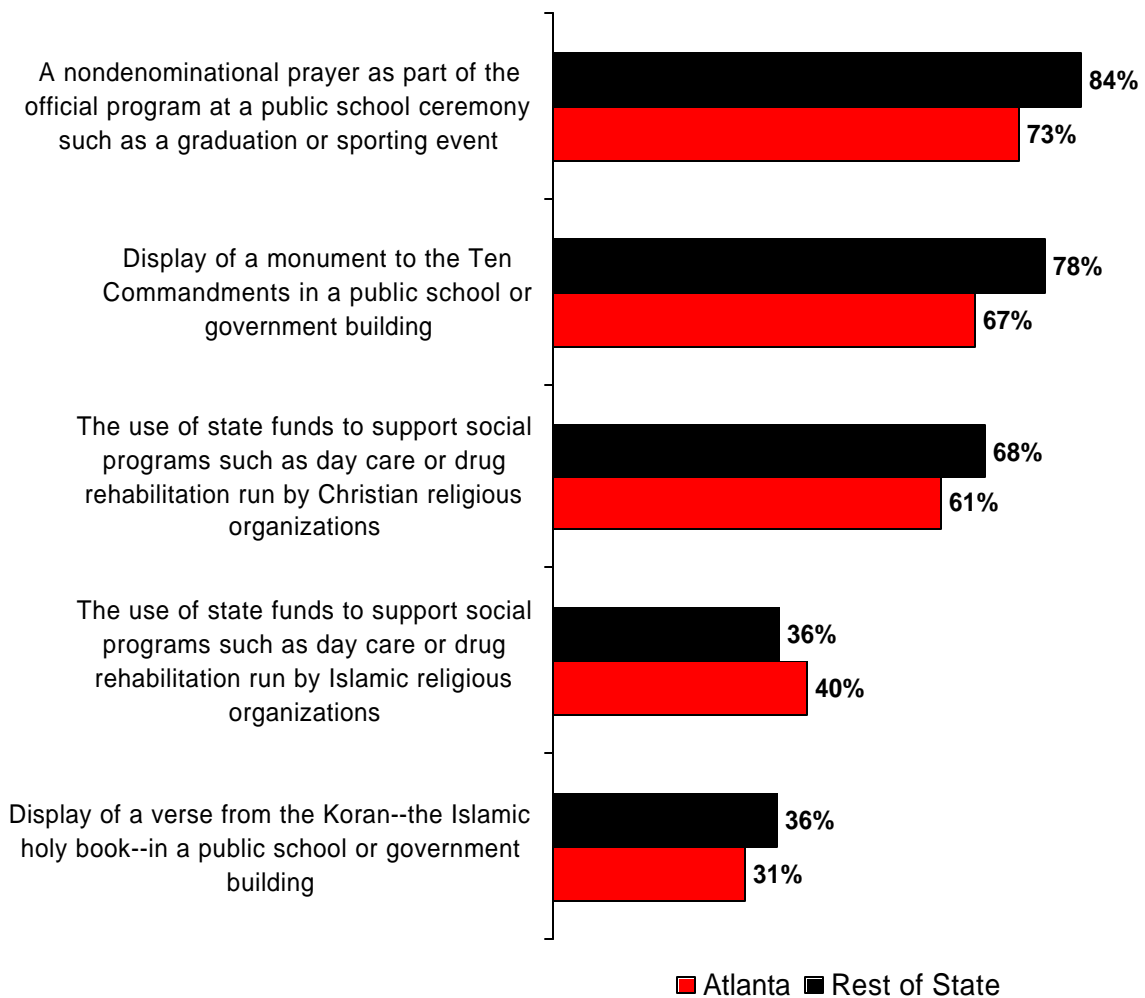
⁸ The numbers for mildly approve and strongly approve do not appear to add to 79 percent due to rounding errors.

Would you approve or disapprove of nondenominational prayer as part of the official program at a public school ceremony such as a graduation or sporting event?



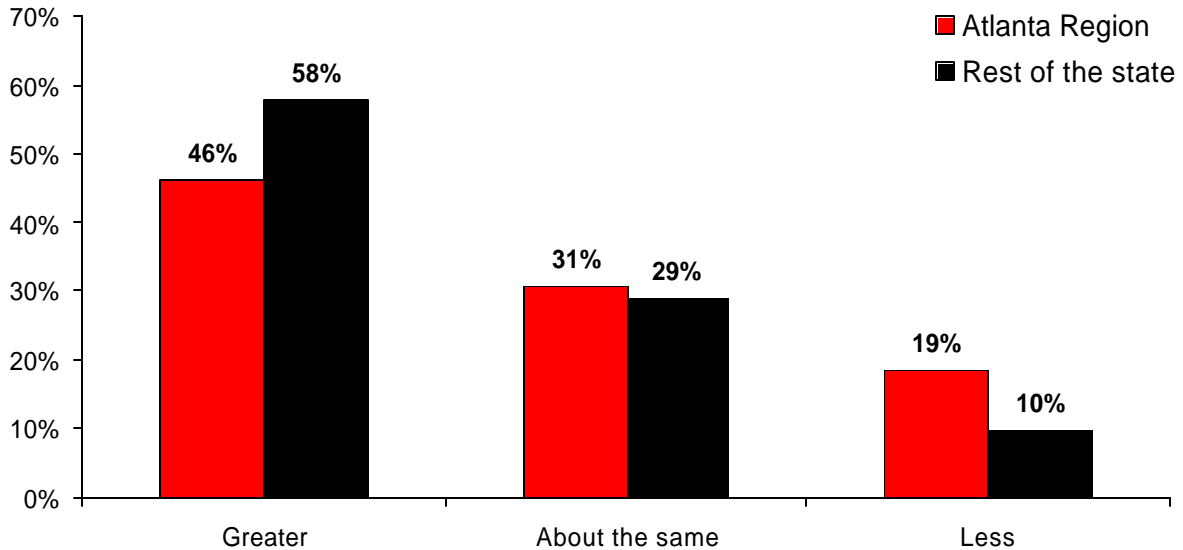
Among Georgians, however, there is a high degree of disagreement on the role of religion in government. First, there is a clear regional difference in opinions on the matter, with those living in the Atlanta area being closer to national opinion in this area than are those living outside the Atlanta metropolitan area. In general, Georgians living in the Atlanta metropolitan area are less supportive of mixing church and state than are those Georgians living elsewhere in the state. The only small, but notable, exception comes in the attitudes about the use of state funds for programs run by Islamic organizations; on this point, Atlantans are marginally more supportive than are non-Atlantans. The difference in attitudes about funding programs run by faith-based organizations—based upon whether the faith is Christianity or Islam—is not as great for Atlantans as it is for those living outside the capital region (a 21 point difference compared with a 32 point difference).

Percent Expressing Approval of ...



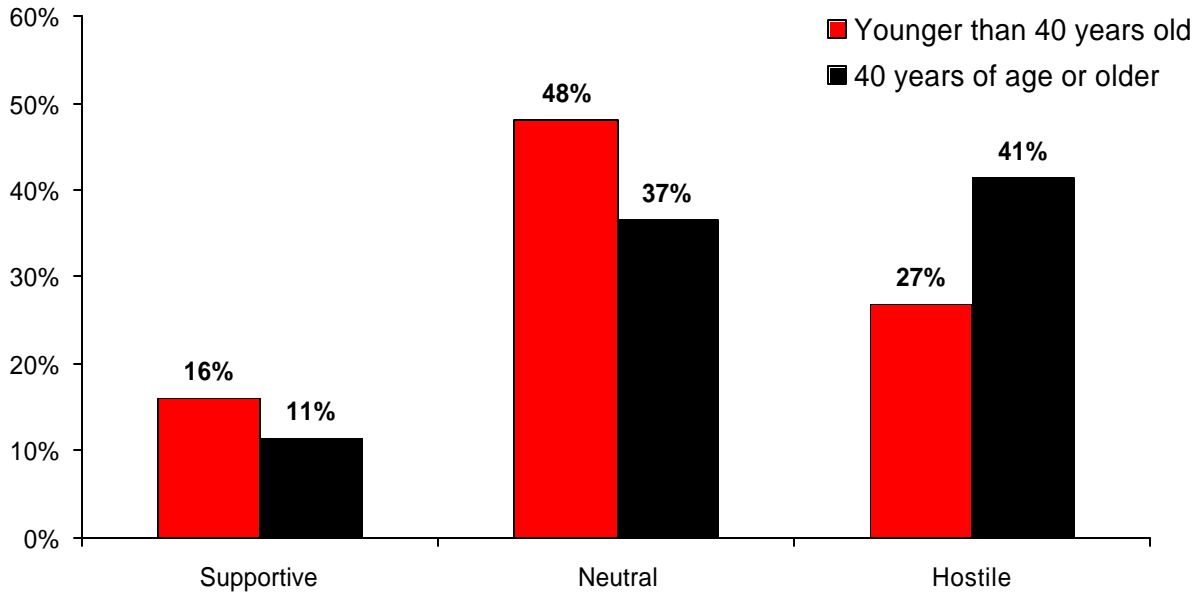
Residents of the Atlanta region are also less likely than other Georgians to say that they would like to see spirituality and religious values play a larger role in public and political life. In fact, nearly 2 in 10 Atlantans say that they would like to see religious values have less influence than they do today, as compared with only 1 in 10 non-Atlantans who expressed this view.

In general, would you rather see religious and spiritual values have greater influence in politics and public life than they do now, less influence, or about the same influence as they do now?



Age is another factor influencing one’s view on the role of state and religion. Older Georgians are more apt to favor mixing religion and government than are younger Georgians. For one thing, younger Georgians—those under 40 years of age—are less likely to believe that the courts have acted with hostility to Christian religions than are their older counterparts. In fact, 51 percent of Georgians over the age of 65 believe that the courts have been generally hostile to Christian religions, while 22 percent of those between the ages of 18 and 25 share this view.

Do you think federal courts have generally been supportive, neutral, or hostile toward Christian religions in their rulings?



The data presented in this report related specifically to opinion in Georgia are taken from a Peach State Poll conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government between November 16 and November 23, 2003. The poll included 807 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. Although sampling error is only one source of potential survey error, all precautions have been taken to minimize other sources of error for this survey.

The Carl Vinson Institute of Government, a public service and outreach unit of the University of Georgia, has as part of its mission to provide policymakers with systematic, objective research to inform policy decisions. In accordance with that mission, the Peach State Poll aims to give voice to the public on important policy matters and issues pertaining to political, social, and economic life in Georgia.

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