

Voting without Paper: Public Attitudes Related to Georgia's Touchscreen Voting System

As we enter another election year, we approach the first presidential election since 2000, which brought scrutiny upon the system by which votes are cast and counted and which sent public confidence in the system plummeting. The occasion of the Florida recount and surrounding events prompted the Georgia Secretary of State to reexamine the means by which Georgians cast their votes. An analysis of the Georgia election process in 2000 showed a higher undercount—the number of ballots in which no vote is cast for a presidential candidate—in Georgia than in Florida, and large discrepancies in the rate of undercounts across counties that used different election equipment. Poorer counties, which tended to rely on punch card ballots, showed the highest levels of undercounts. Consequently, the Secretary of State's office in Georgia determined to standardize and improve the state's election process.

The product of the Secretary of State's efforts is a statewide system of fully electronic, touchscreen voting machines. After a pilot test in November 2001, the chosen system was first implemented statewide in the November 2002 general election, and it has been used in all elections since. A report by the Election Reform Information Project released in January 2004 finds that Georgia is one of only four states that has eliminated punch card ballots and one of two that have adopted statewide electronic voting systems.¹

In September 2001, the Peach State Poll asked Georgians how concerned they were about the state of election equipment used nationally and in the respondent's precinct. Seventy-three percent expressed concern about election equipment nationally, and 55 percent expressed concern about the equipment used in their precinct. In that same poll, 22 percent of Georgians said they were either not very confident (10 percent) or not at all confident (12 percent) that their vote was accurately counted in the 2000 Presidential election.

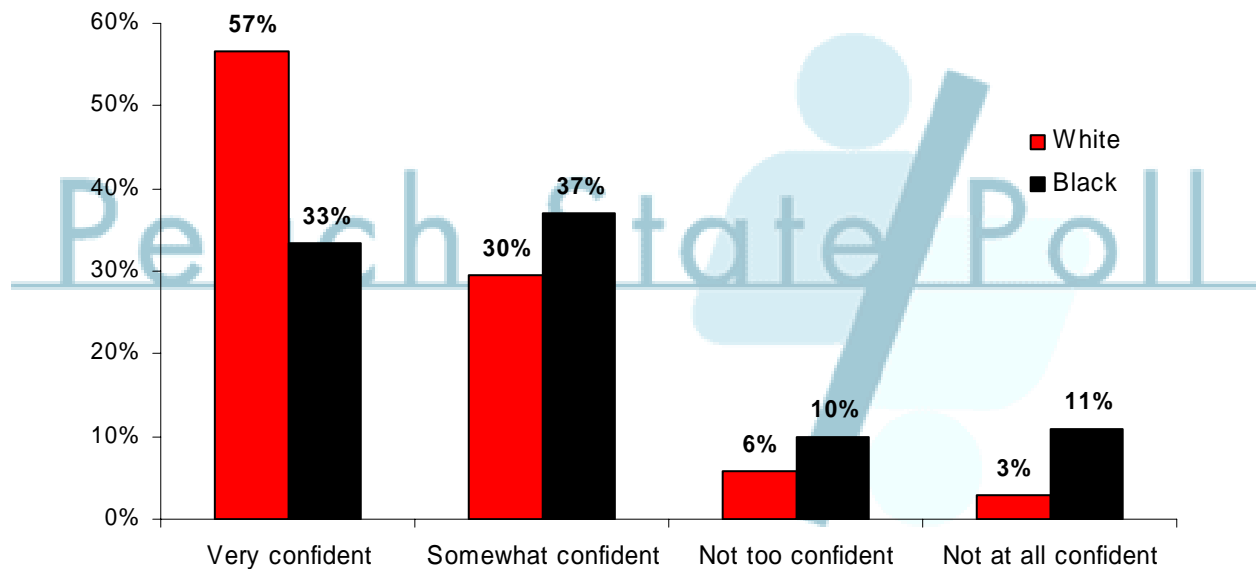
In December 2002, we asked Georgians if they thought their vote was accurately counted in the most recent election—the November 2002 general election—and the percent saying they were not very confident or not at all confident dropped substantially (5 percent and 2 percent, respectively). In that election, Georgians voted using the new touchscreen voting machines for the first time in a statewide election.²

¹ Election Reform Information Project. "Election Reform: What's Changed, What Hasn't, and Why." January, 2004. (www.electionline.org)

² It is important to note that the increase in confidence cannot be directly attributed to the use of the new machines; several other factors exist that might have impacted the public's confidence. For example, the media's focus on problems surrounding the election in 2000 was not present following the 2002 elections. The focus of the media in 2000 may have precipitated the decline in confidence for the short term. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the new machines and the state's commitment to addressing past problems did not contribute to restoring confidence in the system.

In November 2003, the Peach State Poll asked Georgians to think back to the gubernatorial and U.S. Senate elections of the previous year; this time, 12 percent said they were either not very confident (7 percent) or not at all confident (5 percent) that the voting machines produced an accurate count in their district for that election. This poll question differed from that asked earlier in that it asked specifically about confidence in the new machines and not about confidence in whether or not one's own vote was accurately counted. Nevertheless, a vast majority said that they were either very confident (48 percent) or somewhat confident (32 percent) that the voting machines in their precinct produced accurate results. As in earlier polls, white Georgians show greater levels of confidence in the accuracy of vote totals than do black Georgians, but both whites and blacks believe that the new voting machines are an improvement over past methods of voting.

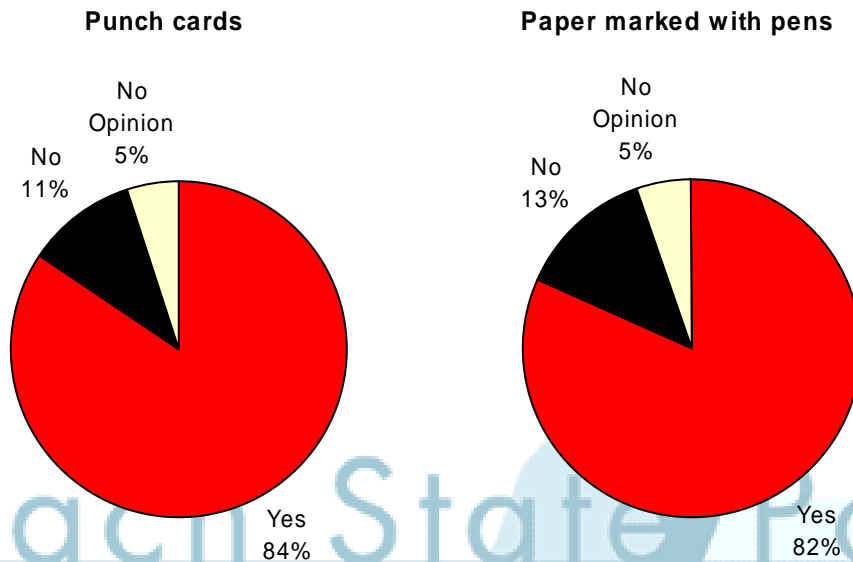
Thinking back to the 2002 gubernatorial and senatorial races, how confident were you that the voting system in your district produced accurate election results?



Whereas a clear majority (76 percent) of Georgians say that the new voting system will have no impact on whether or not they will vote in future elections, one in five Georgians (20 percent) and one in four African Americans (25 percent) say that the implementation of the new system makes it more likely that they will vote. If Georgians act upon this intention, the new system can potentially increase voter turnout, which has been low in Georgia in comparison to the rest of the nation.

The November 2003 Peach State Poll asked the public to compare the current touchscreen system with former methods of voting. More than four in five Georgians believe that electronic voting is an improvement over punch card ballots (84 percent) and over paper ballots marked by pen (82 percent). In fact, Georgians in all age groups, all levels of education and income, all racial and ethnic groups, all regions of the state believe electronic voting machines to be an improvement over other methods.

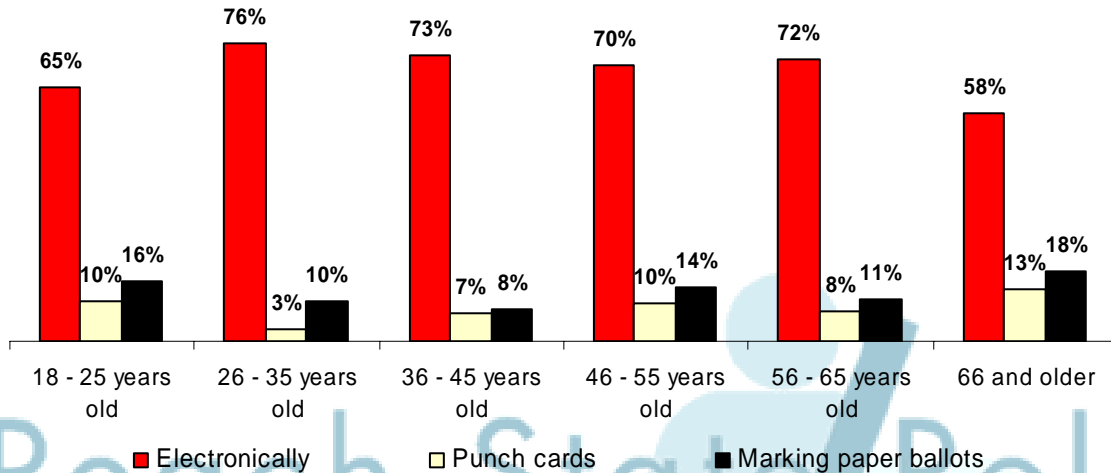
Are electronic voting machines an improvement over ...



When asked, in an open ended question, what is the greatest advantage of the new touchscreen machines, a plurality of Georgians (44 percent) said that they are convenient to use. Twenty-two percent cited increased accuracy, and 6 percent cited faster tabulation of results as the greatest advantage of the new machines. Eight percent of respondents expressed their view that the new machines held no advantages over other methods.

Consistent with the finding that ease of use is seen as the greatest advantage of the new system, 70 percent of the public say they are more comfortable voting on touchscreen machines than on punch cards or other paper ballots. While all age groups feel more comfortable with the touchscreen machines than with paper ballots, Georgians over age 65 are the least comfortable with the new machines. Surprisingly, those under age 25 are only slightly more comfortable with the touchscreen machines than are the oldest of the state’s residents.

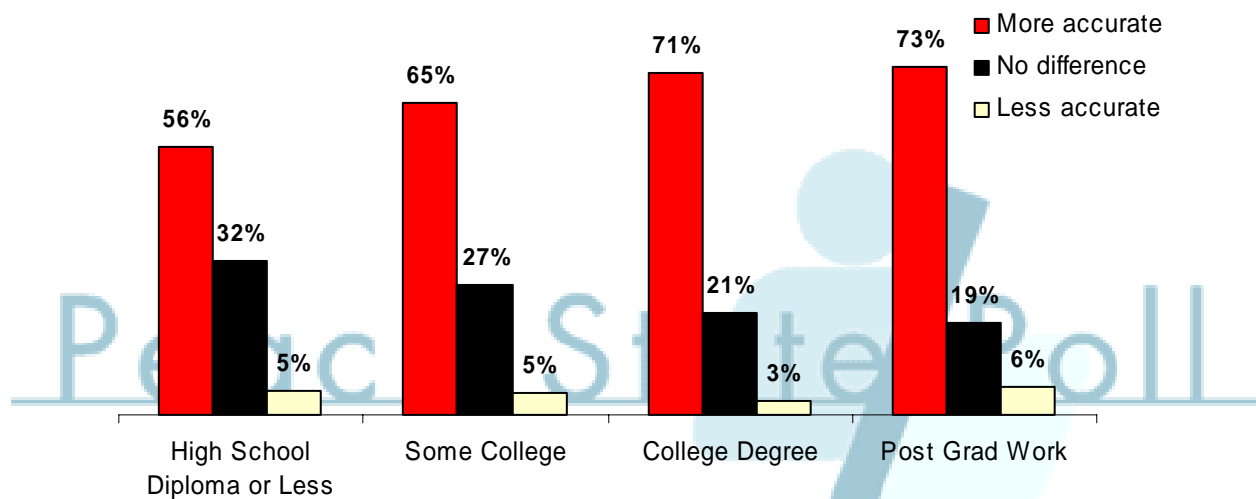
Comfort level with various methods of voting by age



When asked what they believed to be the greatest problem with the new voting machines, a plurality (26 percent) said that there were no problems. The second most cited response to this question (19 percent) was the likelihood that some people are not comfortable with new technology, although only 3 percent said that they personally found the machines difficult to use. Thirteen percent of respondents said that the reliance on the power grid and the competency of programmers was the greatest problem, and another 12 percent cited the potential for fraud or cheating as the greatest problems with the new voting machines.

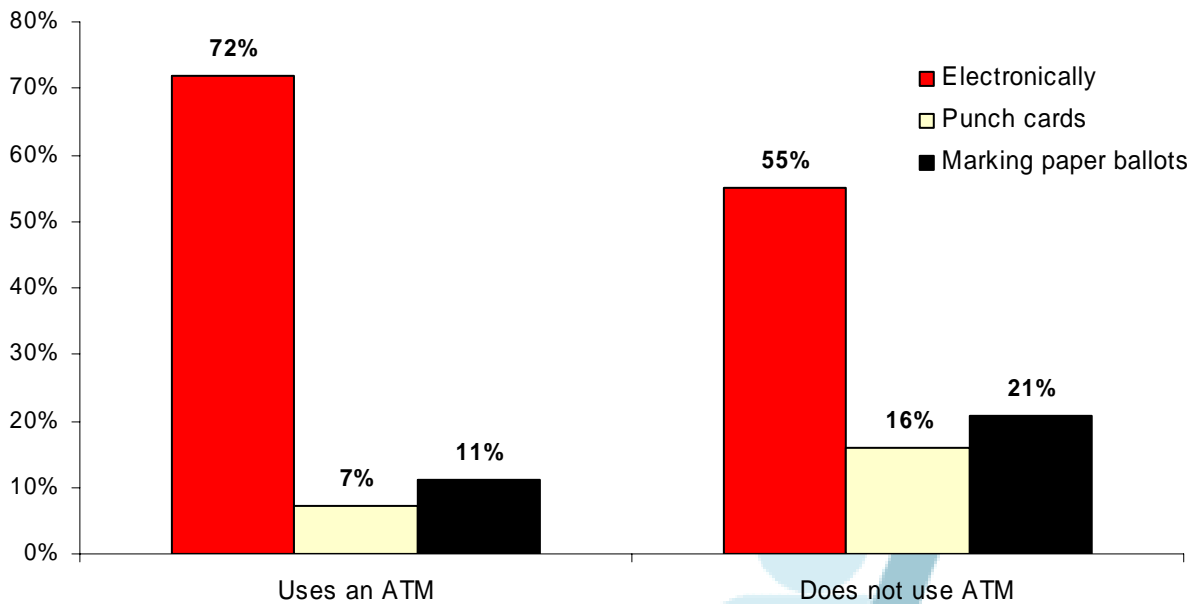
A solid majority of Georgians (64 percent) believe that the new, electronic voting system will result in more accurate elections overall; while 27 percent of the public say the new machines will have no impact on the accuracy of elections, very few Georgians believe that the new system will be less accurate overall than its predecessor. Those with higher levels of education are more likely to believe that the new electronic voting system will increase the accuracy of Georgia’s elections. Fifty-six percent of those with a high school education or less believe that the new system will improve the overall accuracy compared with 73 percent of those with postgraduate education.

Overall, does the new, electronic voting system in Georgia make for more accurate elections in this state, less accurate elections, or does it make no difference?



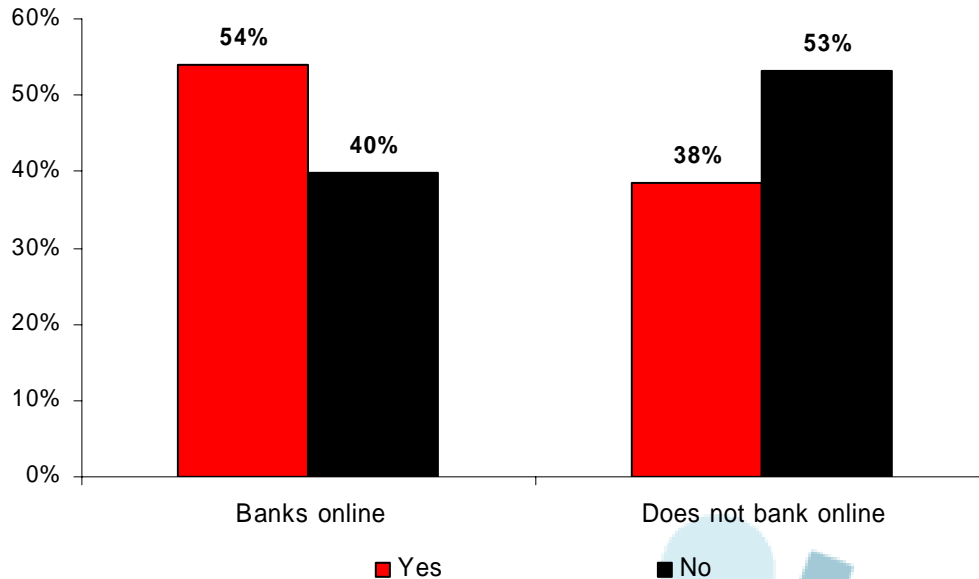
Those who use automated teller machines (ATMs) are likely to be more comfortable using electronic polling equipment than are those who do not bank with ATMs. ATM users are also more likely to say that the new touchscreen voting machines are an improvement over paper ballots, and ATM users are also more likely to say that the new machines will result in fewer vote counting errors. We asked respondents about their use of automatic teller machines and e-commerce tools in order to get a sense of each respondent’s comfort level with technology as applied to something valuable: their finances. We found that those who are comfortable using technology to bank and shop are generally more comfortable voting electronically than are Georgians who do not use e-commerce, online banking, or ATM machines.

Are you more comfortable with the idea of casting your vote electronically like on the new touchscreen machines, by punch cards, by marking a paper ballot with a pen, or by some other method?



A plurality of Georgians (49 percent) do not believe that we should be striving toward a system by which citizens can vote from home via the Internet. Nevertheless, a substantial minority (43 percent) believe that we should strive for such a system. Although some Georgians may see a value in gathering at a community polling place to cast votes, it is more likely that hesitancy to want to move toward Internet voting is based on a lack of trust in the security provided by Internet technology. Those who use online banking services also have more faith than those who do not bank online that voting can be conducted, in time, over the Internet. A majority of those who bank online (54 percent) say that we should be striving toward a system by which Georgians can vote from home via the Internet, while a majority of those who do not bank online (53 percent) do not believe we should strive for such a system.

Should we be striving toward a system by which Georgians can vote from home over the Internet?



Georgia is one of two states that lead the nation in voting reform, not merely as a result of moving toward electronic voting but because Georgia has implemented a system that is uniform across the state. Thus, all Georgians share the advantages or disadvantages of the new voting system on an equal footing. The Peach State Poll finds near unanimity (95 percent) in the belief that having a uniform system is either very important (77 percent) or somewhat important (18 percent). Consistent with these attitudes, only 17 percent of Georgians believe that individual counties should be allowed to decide the method by which their constituents cast votes.

The results of the November 2003 Peach State Poll show that public opinion in favor of the new system of voting is extremely strong. Although those with higher use levels and comfort with advanced technology are even more supportive of touchscreen voting than the average Georgian, the average Georgian is still quite supportive. In addition, while African Americans throughout the state are still more skeptical of the electoral process than are whites, Georgia's African American communities are also largely supportive of the new system. It is important that those who feel that their votes were not fairly counted in prior elections believe in the value of the new reforms. Both the new machines and the fact that these machines are utilized by all communities equally seems to have had an impact in attitudes about Georgia's system of elections as measured across three statewide polls. It is also likely that time having passed since the 2000 election debacle has softened the attitudes of skeptics—which leaves open the potential for further disillusionment with democracy should another voting controversy similar in scope occur.

The data presented in this report 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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