

# POLICY NOTES

## Public Opinion in Georgia Splits along Racial Lines

By *Richard L. Clark*

**P**each State Polls are conducted quarterly and include telephone interviews of randomly selected adults in Georgia. The margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level is +/- 3.5 percent.

In the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, public opinion polls show that Americans' feelings of national unity and trust of government and each other have soared. Referring to data gathered in October and November 2001, Robert Putnam writes, "Whites trust blacks more. Asians trust Latinos more, and so on, than these very same people did a year ago."

It would be wrong, however, to assume that these feelings negate serious divisions in social and political attitudes that cut along racial lines. The Gallup Poll Social Audit on Black and White Relations, released in July 2001, shows a large gap in the perceptions by whites and blacks on the issue of whether blacks are treated fairly in American society. According to Gallup, "Perceptions of unequal opportunity in education and housing and of unfair treatment of blacks—especially by police—illustrate the concerns of many black Americans." The opinion gap is consistent with what Georgia polls have shown since September 11.

In Georgia, demographic data reveal profound socioeconomic differences based on race:

- Whites constitute 65.1 percent of the state's population but only 33.4 percent of those incarcerated in Georgia. Seventy percent of African Americans over age 25 have no education beyond high school; for whites, the figure is 55 percent.
- The median household income for blacks in the South, according to the 2000 U.S. Census Current Population Survey is \$29,776 compared with \$40,883 for whites in the same region.
- In Georgia counties with a black population of 40 percent or more, the average median household income is \$27,848; in areas where blacks make up 20 percent or less of the population, it is \$38,543.

With such socioeconomic differences in the state, it is not surprising that the attitudes of blacks and whites differ. Yet, these socioeconomic differences cannot account for all the divergent racial attitudes. Even controlling for education and income, recent Peach State Polls show that the opinions of blacks and whites differ dramatically on many issues central to our democracy, including confidence in the state's election system, support for capital punishment, and satisfaction with the quality of life in Georgia. In other words, the attitudes of whites and blacks with similar incomes and education are still likely to differ on these issues.

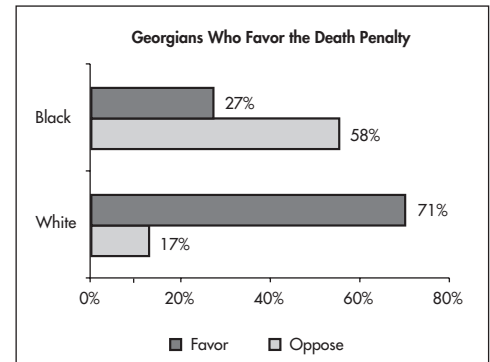
**Elections.** The 2000 presidential election brought many of the attitudinal differences that cut along racial lines to the fore. African Americans are more than twice as likely as whites to say that permanent harm has been done to the country as a result of the election debacle (63 percent compared with 27 percent). Additionally, about three out of four black respondents (76 percent) agree that the problems concerning the vote count in the 2000 election have "led to a decline in the public's faith in American democracy." Controlling for partisan preferences does not change this difference; black Democrats were more than twice as likely as white Democrats to emphatically agree that the problems of the 2000 election have diminished confidence in our democratic system.

**Capital Punishment.** Support for and attitudes about capital punishment also differ by race at both the national and state levels. The Peach State Poll found that 57 percent of Georgians

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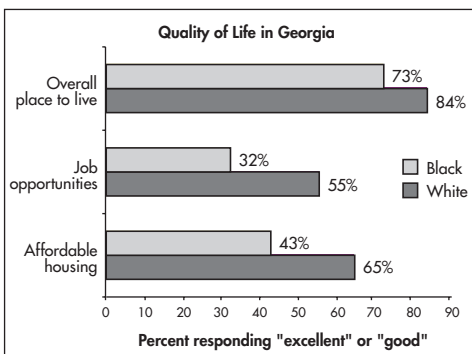


favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder: only 27 percent of blacks favor the death penalty, however, as opposed to 71 percent of whites. In Georgia, blacks are more than twice as likely as whites to favor life in prison to capital punishment for persons convicted of murder (63 percent versus 27 percent). White support for the death penalty cannot be attributed to a sense that crime is on the rise since blacks in Georgia are much more likely than whites to believe that crime in the state has increased over the past two years (42 percent and 29 percent, respectively). Again, both nationally and in Georgia, the death penalty is seen as disproportionately applied when the individual convicted of murder is African American. While 29 percent of Georgia's population is black, 46 percent of prisoners under sentence of death in the state are black.



**Quality of Life.** In addition to the differences on these two important issues, a distinct racial divide also exists concerning general attitudes about the quality of life in Georgia. As a general measure of satisfaction, the Peach State Poll asked, “In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in Georgia. Seventy-two percent of whites responded that they are “very satisfied” (21 percent) or “somewhat satisfied” (51 percent), with only 25 percent expressing some level of dissatisfaction. On the other hand, 43 percent of blacks expressed dissatisfaction—22 percent responding “very dissatisfied.” Even though a majority of blacks (55 percent) said that they are either “very satisfied” (13 percent) or “somewhat satisfied” (42 percent), the difference between the two levels of satisfaction is 17 percentage points. (For complete poll results, see [www.cviog.uga.edu](http://www.cviog.uga.edu).)

In summary, this opinion gap has broad implications for the future of democracy in Georgia. It is important for policymakers to be aware that the continued racial division of publics concerning perception differences generally has a basis in real social, political, and economic conditions.



Addressing differences in election equipment in various counties, in perceptions of fairness pertaining to the use of the death penalty, and in important quality of life differences is the surest way of creating a more unified public. Election system reforms, temporary moratoriums on the death penalty, and the Southern Study on Persistent Poverty are all steps in that direction, while ignoring the divergence of attitudes along racial lines, on the other hand, could very well contribute to perpetuating if not exacerbating the divide.

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## Selected Resources

Gallup Organization. Social Audit: Black-White Relations in the United States. Gallup Poll, July 2001. Washington, D.C.: Gallup Organization. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/specialReports/pollSummaries/sr010711.asp>. Accessed February 20, 2002.

Howell, Susan E., and Deborah Fagan, 1988. “Race and Trust in Government: Testing the Political Reality Model.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 3: 343–50.

Putnam, Robert. 2002. “Bowling Together: The United States of America.” *The American Prospect* 13, no. 2 (February): 20–22.

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