

POLICY NOTES

Voter Confidence Shaken by 2000 Election, but Public Is Buoyed by State Efforts to Upgrade Election Equipment

by *Richard L. Clark*

The Peach State Poll was conducted during the month of September and included 802 telephone interviews of randomly selected adults in Georgia. The margin of error is ± 3.5 percent.

The 2000 presidential election brought to light extensive deficiencies in the system by which votes are cast and counted in American elections. Nothing illustrated these problems more clearly than the controversy in Florida over its electoral college votes and the standards by which votes should be counted. Overcounts, undercounts, chads, and butterfly ballots quickly became a standard part of the daily lexicon.

The focus of the election debacle was on the state of Florida, but while Florida's rate of undervotes was an alarming 2.9 percent—in contrast to a national average of 1.9 percent—the state of Georgia had an undervote rate of 3.5 percent. Because the presidential vote was not as close in Georgia as in Florida, Georgia's system of casting and counting votes escaped similar intense scrutiny, prompting Georgia Secretary of State Cathy Cox to tell a U.S. Senate committee, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

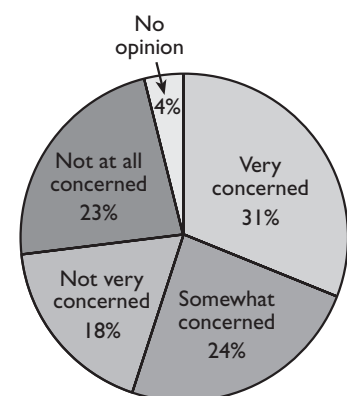
Confidence in the system for casting and counting votes did take a hit in Georgia. According to the Peach State Poll, a public opinion survey of Georgia residents conducted by the Vinson Institute of Government, more than half of Georgians say they are either very concerned (31 percent) or somewhat concerned (24 percent) about the election equipment used in their precinct (see figure).

When asked if the 2000 presidential election did permanent harm to the country, 40 percent of Georgians agreed that it had, despite the question's strong wording and the public's reticence to criticize the government in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks. Among the harms done may be the withdrawal of some citizens from an electoral process they consider questionable. When asked if they planned to vote in the upcoming election (November 2001), 13 percent of the sample admitted that they did not plan to vote, and another 4 percent said it depends. The reasons most frequently given by these respondents are a general lack of interest in politics (11 percent), no interest in the upcoming races (11 percent), and a lack of confidence in the system for counting votes (9 percent).

Both nationally and in Georgia, there is overwhelming evidence of a racial divide concerning attitudes about the 2000 presidential election. On the question of whether or not the 2000 presidential election caused permanent harm to the United States, African Americans in Georgia were more than twice as likely as whites to claim it had. In addition, African

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How concerned are you about the state of election equipment used in your precinct?



Americans' general opinions on issues related to the vote-casting system are more intense than those of other groups. For example, while 63 percent of Georgians agree that the problems surrounding the election of 2000 have diminished the public's faith in American democracy, only 28 percent of whites strongly agree, while 57 percent of African Americans strongly agree. Similarly, of those who planned to vote in the November 2001 municipal elections, 63 percent of whites, compared with 36 percent of African Americans, said they felt very confident that their vote would be accurately counted.

In an effort to deal with the problems that led to the 2000 election debacle, the Georgia General Assembly passed S.B. 213, a comprehensive election reform package. Contingent on state funding, this legislation mandates that all voter precincts use the same type of voting machines by the July 2004 general primary. The state will purchase new machines, and each county will provide technical support. The new equipment will implement the latest technology to improve the accuracy of vote recording and counting. Additionally, from the standpoint of fairness, since each precinct would use the same system, any imperfections would be equally spread across Georgia.

Sixty-nine percent of Georgians support increasing state spending for modernizing election equipment, but the public is ambivalent about raising taxes for that purpose: 50 percent disapprove of such an increase; 38 percent strongly disapprove. On the other hand, those more likely to vote are also more willing to accept a tax increase, specifically one applied directly to fixing the election equipment problems. Obviously, since the success of S.B. 213 depends on state funding down the road, the public's willingness to pay for reforms is a crucial issue.

On the positive side, more than three of every five Georgians (64 percent) believe that government officials are working to address the problems brought to light in the 2000 election. Additionally, four of every five Georgians approve of the legislation mandating all voter precincts to use the same type of voting machines by July 2004. Those most familiar with the legislation were even more likely to support it strongly. Most important, 79 percent of Georgians believe that the legislation will improve the accuracy of vote counting.

Given that democracy rests on the principle of consent of the governed, and the legitimacy of government is critical to the smooth functioning of a democracy, states need to restore voter confidence in the ballot process soon. With the passage of S.B. 213, Georgia, probably more than any other state, is taking steps in that direction. A public relations campaign making Georgians aware of the proposed system for casting and counting votes may be the final step necessary in repairing the damage that was done in November 2000.

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Selected Resources

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Carl Vinson Institute of Government. 2001. Peach State Poll site: http://www.cviog.uga.edu/organiza/peach_state_poll/index.htm.

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