

Trends in Voter Attitudes Towards Charter Schools

by Jamie Self



AN IMPACT PAPER FROM:



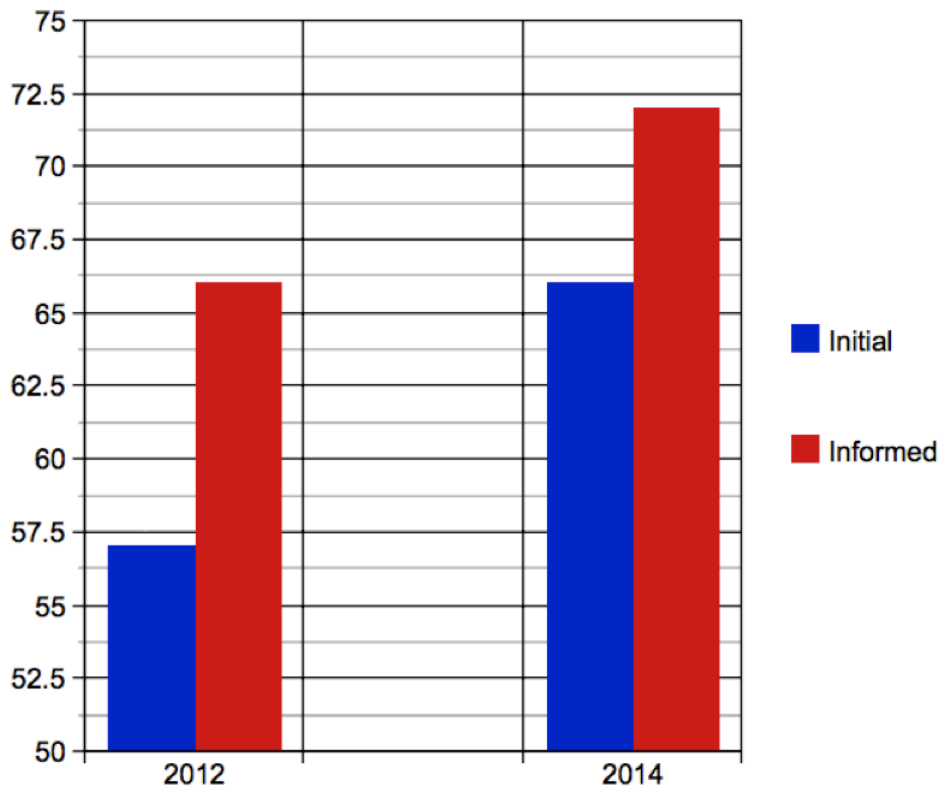
Overview:

Increasingly, Georgia voters express support for public charter schools. The more voters learn about what charter schools are and how they operate, the greater the support, regardless of the voters’ political party affiliation, race, gender, or age.

In less than three years, public support for charter schools has increased almost ten percentage points, from 57% support in early 2012 to 66% in late 2014.

This rapid growth in support can be attributed, in part, to an unanticipated, highly visible campaign public charter schools were forced into in 2012. This resulted in a voting public much more aware and educated about public charter schools, ultimately increasing the number of voters expressing support for charter schools across all key demographics.

Georgia Voters Increasingly Support Public Charter Schools



In January of 2012, a vast majority of Georgians hadn't heard of or couldn't explain a public charter school. Charter schools were not a major topic of political or public debate. But that would quickly change.

In May of 2011, the Georgia Supreme Court dealt a devastating blow to public charter schools. In a controversial 4-3 vote, the Court struck down a 2008 law giving public charter schools denied at the local level the option to appeal to an alternative authorizer at the state level.

The 2008 creation of an alternative charter school authorizer was a direct response to the unwillingness on the part of local school boards to approve even high-quality charter schools. From 1994 to 2008, local school boards approved an average of three start-up charter schools annually. In 2007, there were twenty-six start-up charter school applications before local school boards, including some universally recognized high-quality applications, and every single petition was denied.

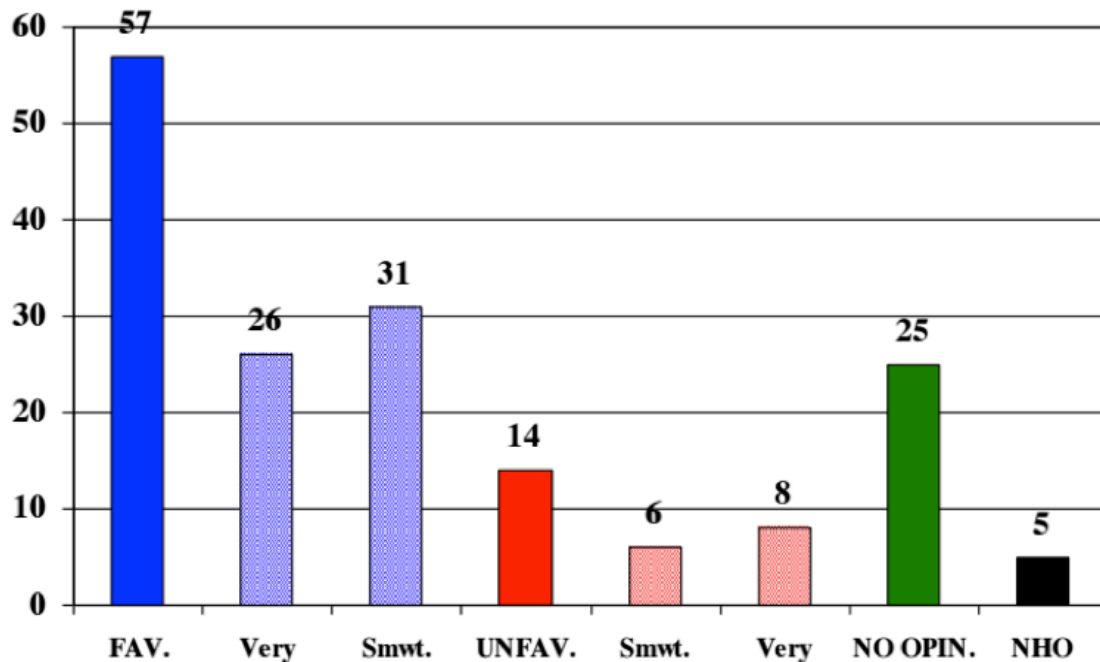
If charter schools were going to continue to be a viable option for Georgia students, something had to be done.

The only response to the Supreme Court's decision was to amend the Georgia Constitution to once again allow the state to review and potentially approve charter school petitions unfairly denied by local school boards. This effort thrust public charter schools into the public eye in a way they had never been before. Suddenly, there was an opportunity for legislators and the general public to learn more about what public charter schools are and how they operate.

Between January 2012 and December of 2014, McLaughlin and Associates, a national survey and research company, conducted several polls in Georgia in which voters were asked about their knowledge and opinion of public charter schools. Polling began as part of the constitutional amendment campaign and has continued since its successful passage. These polls provide a snapshot of the trends in public opinion regarding charter schools over the last few years.

In one of the earliest polls, conducted in late March of 2012,ⁱ charter schools actually polled well, even though most voters were unable to articulate what a charter school is when asked.

Opinion: Public Charter Schools (2012)



Almost six in ten (57%) had a favorable opinion (26% very favorable, 31% somewhat favorable) of public charter schools, while only 14% were unfavorable. Three in ten (30%) had either no opinion (25%) or had never heard of charter schools (5%).

While voters were inclined to be favorable toward charter schools, they also demonstrated a lack of specific knowledge about them.

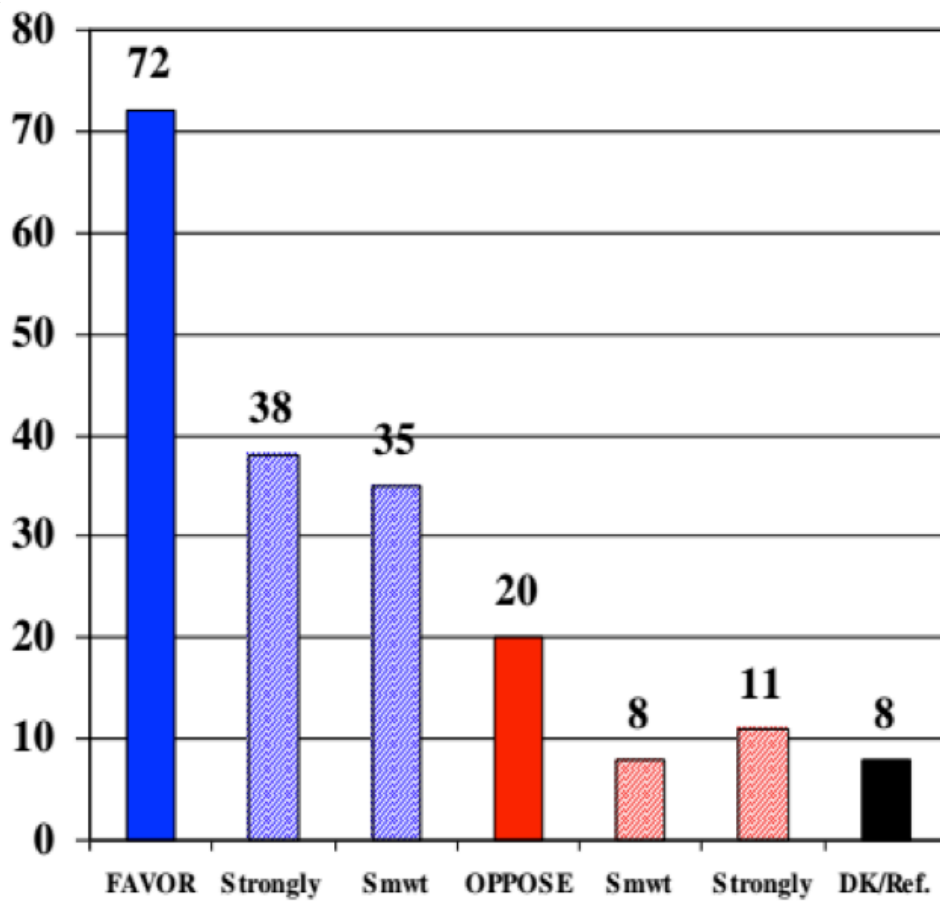
When asked "What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think of charter schools," 83% of voters responded, "I don't know." Some voters said "better quality education" (4%) while others indicated they believed charter schools are private schools that charge tuition (1.5%), a common misperception.

Support for charter schools grew as voters learned more about them.

More than six in ten voters were more likely to support charter schools after hearing they encourage more parental involvement (65% more likely, 8% less likely), are held more accountable (64% more likely, 9% less likely), give parents and students more education options (62% more likely, 12% less likely) and are exempt from many costly bureaucratic rules (61% more likely, 12% less likely).

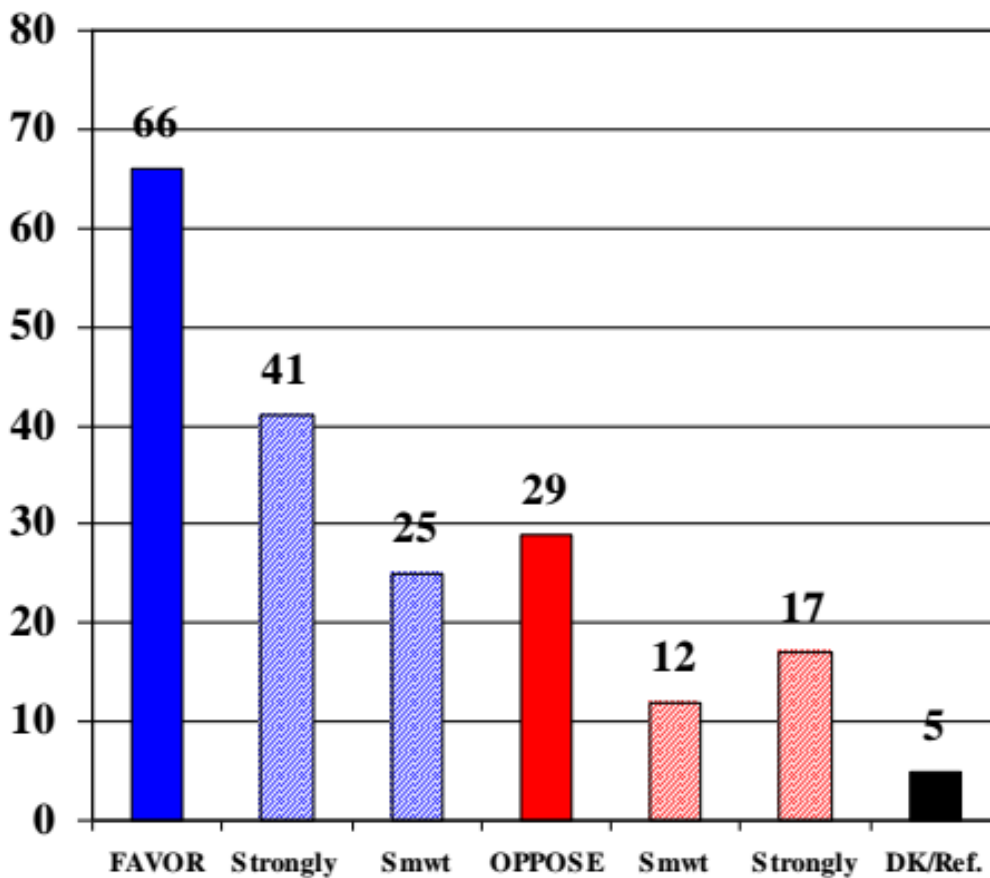
In this survey, McLaughlin and Associates tested the use of the term “public charter schools” as opposed to just “charter schools” or “neighborhood charter schools.” Use of the word “public” drove a 10-point advantage. While charter schools are public schools, there is a common misperception that they are, instead, private schools allowed to be selective about their students and charge tuition. Simply using the accurate term “public charter schools” corrects this faulty thinking and increases support.

Support for Public Charter Schools Once Explained



By December 2014, Georgians' support for public charter schools had increased by a greater than two to one margin, 66% to 24%.ⁱⁱ Once voters were reminded that charter schools are independent Georgia public schools that are free to be more innovative and are held accountable for improved student achievement, support jumped to 72% overall.

General Election voters were asked, "Generally speaking, would you say you favor or oppose school choice?" Here's how voters responded in 2014



Dig a little into the crosstabs and the numbers get even more interesting. Women support charter schools 71%/21%. Men support charters 74%/17%.

White voters favor 70%/21%. There is even more support among African American voters with 74%/19% favoring public charter schools. For voters with school-aged kids, support is almost 80% while voters who don't have kids in school still support charter schools 70%/20%.

The poll went beyond asking about general support or opposition for charter schools and asked voters if they believed "Students in public charter schools should receive the same amount of money for their education as they would have received in their traditional district school?" Again, 70% of voters in Georgia said "yes."

While much of the organized opposition to charter schools focuses on money—arguing that traditional public schools will lose out when education dollars follow a child to a public charter school (just as they would if a child moved to any other public school in the state). However, the more experience voters have with the idea of public charter schools, the more they agree that funding is for the student and it is only fair that all public school students, even public charter school students, be treated equitably when it comes to the state's financial investment.

ⁱ This poll of 600 likely general election voters in the state of Georgia was conducted from March 29th through the 30th, 2012. All interviews were conducted via telephone by professional interviewers. Interview selection was random within predetermined election units. These units were structured to correlate with actual voter turnout in a statewide general election. This poll of 600 likely general election voters has an accuracy of +/- 4.0% at a 95% confidence interval.

ⁱⁱ This survey of 600 likely general election voters in Georgia was conducted by McLaughlin and Associates on November 30th and December 1st, 2014. A subsequent oversample of 142 Republican primary voters was conducted on December 2nd to bring the total number of Republican primary voters up to 400. All interviews were conducted via telephone by professional interviewers. Interview selection was random within predetermined election units. This sample included 25% of interviews conducted on cell phones in the general election sample and 15% of interviews conducted on cell phones in the Republican primary sample. This survey was structured to correlate with actual voter turnout in both a statewide general election and Republican primary election.

This poll of 600 likely general election voters has an accuracy of +/- 4.0% at a 95% confidence interval. The sample of 400 likely Republican primary election voters has an accuracy of +/- 4.9% at a 95% confidence interval. The error margin increases for cross-tabulations.