

# POLICY NOTES

## Don't "Hold the Phone": Georgia Public Favors a Ban on Handheld Cell Phone Use while Driving

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*The data presented in this report are taken from a Peach State Poll conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government between June 10 and June 17, 2002. The poll included 801 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  $\pm 3.5$  percent.*

*Sixty-three percent of adults in Georgia believe that the use of handheld phones while driving should be illegal.*

*Eighty-seven percent of the public believes that using a handheld cell phone while driving is either very dangerous (44 percent) or somewhat dangerous (43 percent).*

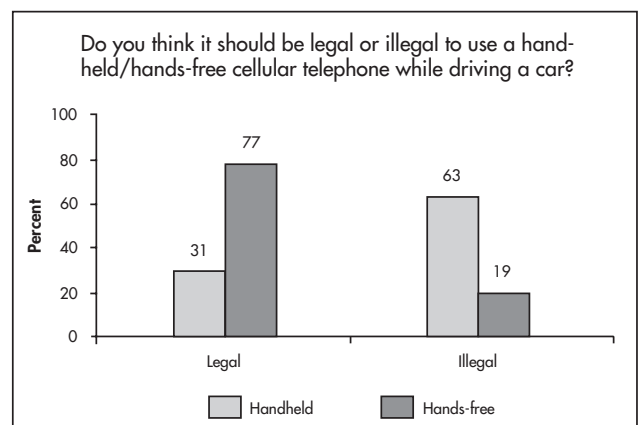
The Georgia legislature, like its counterpart in 41 other states, has engaged in serious discussion about the issue of whether talking on the phone while driving a vehicle should be prohibited or restricted in some way. Based on recent poll data, the public's view on this topic is fairly clear and should inform the ongoing debate regarding the economics and safety issues associated with cell phone use.

The Peach State Poll, a survey of public opinion in the state of Georgia, found that 63 percent of adults in Georgia believe that the use of handheld phones while driving should be illegal. More women (67 percent) than men (59 percent) believe that the use of handheld cell phones while driving should be made illegal. Similarly, nonwhites (68 percent) are more likely than whites (60 percent) and self-described Democrats (72 percent) are more likely than Republicans (52 percent) to favor such a policy. In most demographic categories, the majority believes that using a handheld cell phone while driving should be made illegal.

Sixty-five percent of all respondents report using a handheld cell phone, and 78 percent report using the device at least occasionally while driving. Not surprisingly, those who use a handheld cell phone while driving are less likely to support making the practice illegal. In fact, a majority (57 percent) of those who use their cell phones while driving every day say that the use of handheld phones should remain legal. What is surprising, however, is that 40 percent of those who report using a handheld cell phone while driving on a daily basis nevertheless favor making the practice illegal.

At the root of the public's willingness to ban the use of handheld cell phones while driving is the public perception that such use is dangerous. Eighty-seven percent of the public believes that using a hand-held cell phone while driving is either very dangerous (44 percent) or somewhat dangerous (43 percent). Most Georgians also believe that other drivers who use cell phones pose a real threat to their own safety and that of others. Nearly all respondents report seeing other drivers using their cell phones either very often (81 percent) or somewhat often (15 percent), and 71 percent feel that their own safety has been compromised by other drivers' cell phone use either very often (38 percent) or somewhat often (33 percent).

On the issue of safety as well as legality, survey respondents made a clear distinction between handheld cell phone use and hands-free cell phone use. About three out of four Georgians (77 percent) believe that



using a hands-free cell phone while driving should continue to be legal. The public does not see the hands-free devices as posing the same threat of danger on the roads. In fact, a majority (55 percent) say that using a hands-free cell phone while driving is either perfectly safe (10 percent) or somewhat safe (45 percent).

Several studies offer evidence challenging this distinction—including the finding that the act of having a phone conversation while driving is dangerous, regardless of whether or not one is using a hands-free phone. Strayer et al. (undated) report that “when subjects were deeply involved in cellular phone conversations using either a handheld or hands-free device, they were more than twice as likely to miss simulated traffic signals presented at the center of fixation than when they were not distracted by the cell phone conversation.” Strayer et al.’s research is consistent with studies by Marcel Just, Professor of Psychology at Carnegie Mellon University. “The fundamental implication is that engaging in a demanding conversation could jeopardize judgment and reaction time if an atypical or unusual driving situation arose,” said Just in an interview with ABC News.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Redelmeier and Tibshirani (1997) found that hands-free phones were just as likely to increase the risk of collisions.

Although, nationally, municipal governments have been more aggressive in addressing the use of cell phones while driving, Georgians from all walks of life are more apt to look to state government for a policy response. Forty-seven percent of poll respondents say the state government should act on this issue, whereas 26 percent look to the federal government and 21 percent believe that local governments should address the issue.

Although public sentiment cannot be the sole criterion when policymakers decide the issue, it should be considered together with economic and public safety factors and scientifically gathered evidence. According to the poll cited here, the public seems willing to give up the individual freedom of using the phone while driving for the greater good of public safety, even though the public assessment of the risks associated with cell phone use while driving may or may not be correct. Policymakers who do not favor imposing restrictions likely will not encounter public outrage—after all, the public itself engages in the behavior that is at issue. However, those lawmakers who feel that some restrictions are necessary will likely find support among the general public.

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that, despite these findings, Professor Just labeled a total ban on cell phone use while driving “a bit draconian” in his interview with ABC News.

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*While most respondents say it would be difficult to enforce a law prohibiting the use of handheld cell phones while driving, 60 percent opted for imposing a fine, with an average fine of approximately \$73 suggested by those who specified an amount.*

## Select Sources

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