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## Public Confidence in Nonprofit Groups Slides Back, New Survey Finds

[By Suzanne Perry](#)

Public confidence in charities has slipped since 2006 and only a quarter of Americans say nonprofit groups do a "very good" job of helping people, according to poll results to be released this month. The findings are a setback for the charitable world, which two years ago appeared in the same survey to be regaining some of the goodwill it lost after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The poll, commissioned by New York University's Organizational Performance Initiative, found that 64 percent of Americans have a "great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in charitable organizations, down from 69 percent in 2006.

The 2006 figure was up five percentage points over 2005 — the biggest increase since donor perceptions plummeted after controversies about the way September 11 relief money was distributed. That suggested that public confidence in charities, which stood at 90 percent before the terrorist attacks, could be rebounding.

But Paul Light, a professor at New York University's Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service, said he now thinks the 2006 figure was "a statistical anomaly" and that charities should be alarmed at their failure to convince much of the public they are doing a good job.

"This new survey basically says we're still at the bottom and we're not recovering," he said in an interview.

### Helping Others

Mr. Light said he was particularly concerned that the percentage of Americans who believe charities do a "very good" job of helping people has slid from 34 percent in 2003 to 25 percent today (down from 30 percent in 2006).

"Helping people has long been a key strength of the sector," he wrote in a summary of the survey findings provided to *The Chronicle*. "The fact that it has fallen by a quarter over the past five years is deeply troubling and suggests that charitable organizations may be losing their most prized possession, their reputation for caring."

Given that 48 percent of respondents said they had only a "fair amount" of confidence in charities, nonprofit advocates should not take comfort in the overall confidence level of 64 percent, he said. People with a "fair amount" of confidence have much deeper concerns about the way charities operate than those with a "great deal" of confidence, the survey found.

Furthermore, Mr. Light noted, even those with a "great deal" of confidence have some serious misgivings — for example, 56 percent of them said charitable organizations waste a "great deal" or "fair amount" of money.

### **Katrina Effect**

Mr. Light said charities are still reeling from bad press surrounding the September 11 relief funds, criticism of the American Red Cross for its response to Hurricane Katrina, and, more recently, Congressional hearings on the fund-raising practices of some veterans charities.

He faulted nonprofit leaders for failing to tackle the public-confidence issue head on.

"There's not a national messaging campaign about how the nonprofit sector helps people, there's no effort by foundations and nonprofits on how to promote the sector in any way except for the occasional public-service ad," he said in the interview.

Furthermore, he said, the charitable world needs to agree on a way to measure and report the results of its work to the public.

The survey, which polled 1,001 Americans in March, was paid for by New York University's John Brademas Center for the Study of Congress. It also found:

- Seventy percent of respondents said charities waste a "great deal" or "fair amount" of money. That is about the same as 2006, but up from 60 percent in 2003.
- Only 10 percent said charities are "very good" at spending money wisely; 51 percent said "somewhat good."
- Seventeen percent said charities are "very good" at running programs and services; 59 percent said "somewhat good."

Mr. Light said the "somewhat good" responses were not reassuring. "You never get off an airplane and say, I'm really glad the pilot did a 'somewhat good' job of flying this thing."

### **HOW AMERICANS VIEW CHARITIES**

How Much Confidence People Have in Charities

	September 2002	October 2003	January 2004	August 2004	July 2005	July 2006	March 2008
A great deal	13%	18%	13%	15%	15%	20%	16%

A fair amount	47%	45%	49%	50%	49%	49%	48%
Not too much	26%	27%	25%	20%	24%	20%	25%
None	11%	7%	9%	9%	8%	9%	9%
How Wisely Americans Say Charities Spend Money							
	September 2002	October 2003	January 2004	August 2004	July 2005	July 2006	March 2008
Very good		14%		11%	12%	11%	10%
Somewhat good		45%		51%	42%	52%	51%
Not too good		22%		19%	19%	25%	21%
Not good at all		6%		7%	8%	6%	11%
Percentage of Resources Americans Think Charities Waste							
	September 2002	October 2003	January 2004	August 2004	July 2005	July 2006	March 2008
A great deal		20%		--	24%	28%	24%
A fair amount		40%		--	42%	43%	46%
Not too much		30%		--	21%	23%	23%
None		3%		--	2%	2%	1%
How Well People Think Charities Run Programs and Services							
	September 2002	October 2003	January 2004	August 2004	July 2005	July 2006	March 2008
Very good		19%		21%	19%	18%	17%
Somewhat good		57%		53%	55%	60%	59%
Not too good		11%		15%	11%	13%	12%
Not good at all		2%		3%	4%	5%	5%
How Fairly Americans Think Charities Make Decisions							
	September 2002	October 2003	January 2004	August 2004	July 2005	July 2006	March 2008
Very good		19%		17%	16%	18%	17%
Somewhat good		57%		56%	53%	60%	59%
Not too good		11%		9%	11%	11%	12%
Not good at all		2%		3%	3%	4%	5%

-- Question not asked.

**SOURCE:** New York University's Organizational Performance Initiative

