

The Middle Tennessee Poll

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Summary of Election Findings, Fall 2002

Majority supports income tax that includes sales tax cut. Support for a state income tax plan that includes sales tax cuts has jumped to 58%, a majority that marks a 12 percentage point increase since February's Middle Tennessee Poll. And almost no one considers the income tax a "dead issue that will never be raised again." Tennesseans clearly do not want an income tax enacted on top of the taxes they already pay. Regarding an income tax with no mention of a flat tax, exemptions, or sales tax reductions, only 22% express support.

Republican erosion, economy key in Bredesen victory. Phil Bredesen's ability to attract support among strong Republicans played a key role in Tuesday's election. An overwhelming majority (89%) of strong Democrats said they would vote for Bredesen, while 82% of strong Republicans favored Hilleary, crucial in a close race. Most respondents (56%) felt the national economy is getting worse, and a majority (53%) of those favored Bredesen.

Bredesen voters split about whether he will advocate tax hike. Bredesen voters were evenly split over whether he could govern without raising taxes (43% yes v. 42% no), but a heavy majority (58%) of Hilleary supporters thought he could. Those who favored an income tax that lowered sales taxes (58%) preferred Bredesen to Hilleary. Those who strongly favored such a tax picked Bredesen 56% to Hilleary's 30%. Among those opposed to the tax, 55% went for Hilleary.

Anti-lottery crusade by churches changes few minds. In what may have been a case of preaching to the choir, Tennessee's two largest denominations changed relatively few minds during their crusade against a constitutional amendment allowing a state lottery. Contact:

High taxes matches education as state's No. 1 problem. As many Tennesseans (21%) now believe high taxes are as big a problem as the poor state of education (21%), with government waste taking third place (19%). Just last fall, about 20% rated education the top problem, followed by high taxes at a distant 15%. This focus on taxes follows a spring hike in the sales tax and marks the first time that taxes have come close to education as a leading issue.

Other findings: - Most Tennesseans willing to play a lottery flunked a test of how to play one wisely. Contact: Dr. Ken Blake, 615-210-6187. - Those who cast ballots Tuesday were probably disproportionately either over age 50 or young and well educated.

Details of Major Findings

Majority supports income tax that includes sales tax cut

Support for a state income tax plan that includes sales tax cuts has surged to 58%, a majority that marks a 12 percentage point jump since February's Middle Tennessee Poll. And despite some declarations to the contrary, almost no one (15%) considers the income tax a "dead issue that will never be raised again."

Asked about "an income tax plan that included ending the sales tax on groceries and lowering the sales tax on other items," 29% of Tennessee residents said they would favor it, and another 29% said they would strongly favor it. Sixteen percent said they would oppose it, and another 14% said they would strongly oppose it – a total of 30% expressing disfavor. The rest were unsure. During the February 2002 Middle Tennessee Poll, 46% indicated support for such a plan, while 38% indicated opposition, and 16% weren't sure. The poll did not probe reasons behind the jump in support, but this installment of the Middle Tennessee Poll is the first to be conducted since the state Legislature raised the sales tax rate by a penny.

Other income tax concessions draw less support. For example, 44% of all Tennesseans would favor or strongly favor an income tax plan that included a \$15,000 exemption for each taxpayer, and 37% would favor or strongly favor an income tax if it included a "flat" structure that charged everyone the same amount per dollar of income, regardless of income. However, if an income tax plan were proposed that included each of the concessions – elimination of grocery taxes, cuts in other sales taxes, a flat tax rate, and a \$15,000 exemption for each taxpayer – 72% of Tennesseans would have at least one reason to support it. Such support would break mainly along income lines, with those earning less than \$15,000 a year and those earning between \$25,000 and \$50,000 a year expressing more support (82%) than those earning \$15,000 to \$25,000 or those earning more than \$50,000 (65%).

As in the past, Tennesseans clearly do not want an income tax simply enacted on top of the taxes they already pay. Asked about an income tax with no mention of a flat tax rate, exemptions, or reductions in sales taxes, only 22% express support. Fifty-seven percent indicate opposition, and the rest aren't sure. The figures are nearly identical to those found in the February Middle Tennessee Poll.

Tennesseans also clearly expect a resurgence of the income tax debate despite declarations by some that the state has settled the issue once and for all. Asked, "Do you believe that enacting a personal income tax in Tennessee is a dead issue that will never again be raised," 76% of state residents say "no." Only 15% say "yes," and 8% aren't sure. College-educated residents are somewhat more convinced the issue will return to the table (84%) than are those with only a high school education (64%). Contact Dr. Ken Blake, 615-210-6187.

Republican erosion, economy key in Bredesen victory over Hilleary

Phil Bredesen's ability to attract support among strong Republicans played a key role in his victory over Van Hilleary in Tuesday's election. An overwhelming majority (89%) of

strong Democrats said they would vote for Bredesen, while just 82% of strong Republicans favored Hilleary.

This effect carried over even among weak partisans in the Nov. 5 election, with two-thirds (66%) of weak Democrats favoring Bredesen, compared to 62% of weak Republicans. In a squeaker of an election – Bredesen won by 51% to 48% – the Democratic candidate’s ability to attract Republicans proved crucial and resulted in his solid performance in key Republican strongholds such as Knox County.

How voters felt about the future of the economy also aided Bredesen. Most of poll respondents (56%) felt the national economy is getting worse, and a majority (53%) of those people favored Bredesen. A heavy percentage (60%) who thought the economy is getting better – just over a fourth of the sample (29%) – favored Hilleary. Contact Dr. Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389.

Bredesen voters split about whether he will advocate tax hike

Bredesen voters were evenly split over whether he can govern without raising taxes (43% yes v. 42% no), indicating ambivalence over whether his business experience alone could solve state financial problems. But a heavy majority (58%) of Hilleary supporters thought their candidate would not have to raise taxes at all during his term as governor. Contact Dr. Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389.

Partisan issues aside, the majority of the sample (58%) who favored an income tax that included lowering the sales tax and exempting groceries preferred Bredesen to Hilleary.

Among the 32% who favored such an income tax or who didn’t know, Bredesen led Hilleary 43% to 30%. And the 29% who strongly favored such a tax picked Bredesen 56% to Hilleary’s 30%. However, among those who opposed or strongly opposed this tax proposal, 55% went for Hilleary, with Bredesen attracting fewer than a third (29%).

Anti-lottery crusade by churches changes few minds

In what may have been a case of preaching to the choir, Tennessee’s two largest denominations changed relatively few minds during their crusade against a constitutional amendment allowing a state lottery.

Statewide, regular worshipers formed the backbone of opposition to the lottery, particularly congregants from the Baptist and United Methodist denominations that led the anti-lottery push. Just under half (46%) of self-designated Baptist and United Methodist churchgoers said they either opposed or strongly opposed a state lottery. Among churchgoers from other denominations, barely one in four (26%) expressed opposition. And among all individuals who attend a church of any kind “almost every week” or more frequently, 45% either opposed or strongly opposed a lottery compared to a scant 12% of those attending less often or never.

But across the board, the vast majority of Tennesseans (81%) said they had formed their opinions about the lottery a year ago or longer – well before October, when anti-lottery literature began appearing in Southern Baptist church bulletins and Tennessee United Methodist Bishop William Morris denounced a lottery as an immoral means of balancing the state budget on the backs of the poor.

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Asked directly how much their opinion on a lottery had been influenced by “something one or more people at your church or place of worship said about the lottery,” 73% of Tennessee churchgoers said, “Not at all.” Seven percent responded with “a great deal,” while 8% answered “some,” and 9% said “only a little.” In response to a question asking about the impact of “something you read about a lottery in a brochure or other literature handed out at your church or place of worship,” 79% responded “not at all,” while the responses “a great deal,” “some,” and “only a little” accounted for about 5% each. Those attending Baptist or United Methodist churches answered the influence questions no differently than those attending other denominations. Similarly, churchgoers who described themselves as either “Evangelical or born again” or “Fundamentalist” – terms for theological perspectives that cut across many denominational lines – answered essentially the same way as churchgoers who did not identify with these labels. In short, it appears that by the time the crusade got underway, its primary audience already had formed enduring and relatively negative opinions about a lottery. The crusade may have reinforced those opinions, but it did little to change opinions to the contrary.

The crusade also prompted no comparably unusual level of election participation among Baptists, United Methodists, or churchgoers in general. Eighty-five percent of Baptists and United Methodists said they either “definitely would” or “probably would” cast a vote on the lottery question. But so did 84% of churchgoers from other denominations and 86% of individuals who “seldom” or “never” attend church.

Church attendance does correlate negatively with intent to play a lottery if the state creates one, though. Among those who attend at least once a week, most (52%) say they would never play a lottery. Just over a quarter (28%) of those who attend “almost every week” say they would never play a lottery, and only 16% of those who “seldom” or “never” attend church would refuse to play a lottery.

The poll found support for a lottery running at 60% among all Tennesseans, with 31% opposed and the rest unsure. Among likely voters, the proportion of supporters was a slightly more modest 58%, with 36% opposed and the rest undecided. Interestingly, statewide support for allowing a state lottery does not necessarily indicate statewide willingness to play a lottery if the state created one. Only about one in three Tennesseans would play a lottery either “pretty often” (22%) or “every time there’s a drawing” (9%). The other two-thirds say they would play either “never” (32%) or “rarely” (35%). Contact: Dr. Ken Blake, 210-6187.

High taxes matches education as state’s No. 1 problem

As many Tennesseans (21%) now believe that high taxes are as big a problem as the poor state of education (21%), with government waste narrowly taking third place (19%). This focus on taxes follows a spring hike in the sales tax and marks the first time that taxes have come close education as a leading issue.

Just last fall, about 20% of Tennesseans rated education the top problem, followed by high taxes at a distant 15%. In spring 2001, education was named by 28% and high taxes by just 15%. In previous polls devoted only to Middle Tennessee, education also topped taxes and other issues. In spring 2000, the score was education 19% to 17% for high taxes. In fall 1999 the score was 25% to 12%, and in fall 1998, taxes (4%) were hardly on the agenda, while education was named by 21%.

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The tax issue has thus risen in prominence as the state's fiscal crisis has received increasing attention following former Gov. Don Sundquist's introduction of payroll and income tax proposals beginning in spring 1999.

Over the years, however, concern for education has remained constant at near or above 20%. Thus, increased emphasis on taxes as a problem has shifted attention from other issues but not away from education, which retains its high profile as an issue.

Among those who were likely to have voted in Tuesday's election, education (22%) was a more important problem than taxes (20%). Among those less likely to have voted, taxes led the way (24% to 17%). Many likely (19%) and unlikely (18%) voters also remain concerned about government waste.

A gender gap is also evident, with one in four (25%) women scoring education highest and high taxes second (22%). For men, however, one in four (25%) rated government waste No. 1, followed by high taxes (20%), and, at a distant third, education (16%). Contact Dr. Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389.

Most who would play a lottery would overplay a lottery

Most Tennesseans who would play a lottery flunked a test of how to play one wisely. Statistically, the smartest way to play a lottery, if at all, is to buy only one ticket per drawing. The odds of winning a typical lottery are so small that buying additional tickets does not substantially improve one's chances of hitting the jackpot.

As a test of knowledge about this principle, the poll asked, "If tomorrow you could enter a state lottery drawing for a \$100 million jackpot, how many tickets, if any, would you buy if tickets cost one dollar each?" Of Tennesseans who said they would play a lottery at least "rarely," 17% would make the smart choice of buying only one ticket. Other popular purchase amounts were \$5 (29%), \$10 (19%), and \$20 (11%). Excluding two obvious outliers – one individual who would spend \$500 and another who would spend \$1,000 – the average amount came to \$10.20, with amounts varying by an average of \$17.

Less educated Tennesseans proved likely to spend more than better-educated residents. Those with a high school degree or less would spend an average of \$13.50, while those with at least some college education would spend \$8.47 on average. Among the better educated, the wealthy would spend more than those in the middle or lower classes. Contact: Dr. Ken Blake, 615-210-6187.

Over 50s, educated, affluent more likely to have voted

Age continued to be the most important determinant of those who were likely to have voted in Tuesday's election. In fact, more than half (55%) of all respondents 50 and over said they were registered and were highly likely to vote.

Among respondents 18-34, the figures are almost a mirror opposite, with nearly half (48%) saying that they were unregistered or were unlikely to vote if registered. Among younger respondents, only 17% said they were registered and highly likely to vote. For those 35-49, the proportion of likely voters hovered at four in 10 (42%). Education, income and partisanship also played roles in determining voting probability. Among the younger group, education was particularly important: For high school graduates or less,

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two-thirds (66%) were unregistered or unlikely to vote, a figure that dropped to 37% among those with at least some college.

For those age 50 and above, nearly two-thirds (63%) with family incomes of \$40,000 or more were registered and highly likely to vote, while only about a third (32%) with less income were likely voters.

Among respondents 35 to 49 years old, partisanship proved important, with more than half (57%) describing themselves as strong Republicans, strong Democrats, or Independents highly likely to vote. Less than a third (30%) with weak Democrat or Republican leanings were highly likely voters. Contact Dr. Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389.

Sample and Method

The poll was conducted by telephone Oct. 21 through Nov. 2, 2002 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 605 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the population within 4 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. Other factors, such as question wording, also affect the outcome of a survey. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups.

Although the survey was conducted before the election, the analysts concentrated on explaining why certain outcomes happened rather than attempting to predict the results, which were well within the survey's margin of error for the governor's race.

The sample varied somewhat from the U.S. Census Bureau's latest available projections for age, race and gender proportions within the state. Such variation commonly occurs because certain demographic groups are more difficult to contact. The data were thus weighted to more closely match Census projections for these demographics. The following table presents the relevant percentages.

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	30.2%	34.0%	0.89	30.3%
35-49	30.9%	29.3%	1.06	31.3%
50-64	22.4%	23.7%	0.95	22.1%
65+	16.5%	13.0%	1.27	16.2%
Race:				
White	83.9%	88.3%	0.95	84.4%
Black	14.9%	8.0%	1.86	14.5%
Other	1.2%	3.7%	0.33	1.2%
Gender:				
Male	47.4%	50.1%	0.95	46.5%
Female	52.6%	49.9%	1.05	53.5%