

The Middle Tennessee Poll

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Summary of Major Social and Policy Findings, Fall 2002

Many wary of immigrants' effect on quality of life. Fully one-third of Tennesseans (34%) think that Mexicans and other Hispanic immigrants are making life in the state worse. And 38% believe that Middle Easterners are making life here worse. Attitudes toward immigrants have become more negative over time, at least in Middle Tennessee. In a 1998 sample of Middle Tennesseans only, 28% said Hispanics were making life worse, a number that jumped to 41% among Middle Tennesseans in the current poll.

Most think U.S. immigration policy too open. Nearly three-fourths of Tennesseans (74%) think that the U.S. is too open to immigrants. This figure is similar to that found in a September poll by the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, where 71% rated the national policy as too open.

Attitude toward Iraq invasion complex. The vast majority of Tennesseans seem comfortable with an invasion of Iraq if the United Nations supports the move. When first asked whether they favor sending ground troops to Iraq, a majority of Tennesseans (54%) agree, though only about one-third (35%) support such invasion if the U.N. opposes the move. With U.N. support, more than two-thirds (68%) favor an invasion.

Economic pessimism on the rise. Tennesseans have grown substantially more pessimistic since spring both about the national economy and their personal finances. Overall, 56% of state residents say the national economy is getting worse – a substantial increase in pessimism since March, when 41% perceived a declining national economy.

“God bless America” no cliché. The phrase “God bless America” is held dear by most Tennesseans, but only one in five ever speaks or writes it. More Tennesseans believe President Bush means something patriotic when he says, “God Bless America” than believe he means something religious. Most say they began using the phrase before the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. About one in four have purchased a product with the phrase on it.

National security drives foreign policy attitudes, but altruism important. Asked to rate the importance of several possible American foreign policy goals, nearly nine in 10 (89%) said strengthening the economy was very important, followed by promoting and defending U.S. security (87%), protecting American jobs (87%), and combating terrorism (83%). But more altruistic values also received good support, including keeping world peace (65%), promoting human rights (65%), combating world hunger (54%), fostering international cooperation (55%), and arms control (53%).

Details of Major Social and Policy Findings

Many wary of immigrants' effects on the quality of life

Increasingly visible numbers of immigrants and the events of Sept. 11, 2001, doubtless contribute to the fact that Hispanics and Middle Easterners are none too popular among Tennesseans, and attitudes toward Hispanics seem to have deteriorated in Middle Tennessee since a 1998 survey.

Fully one-third of Tennesseans (34%) think that Mexicans and other Hispanic immigrants are making life in the state worse. And 38% believe that Middle Easterners are making life here worse. About 18% feel that Hispanics are actually improving life, but just 8% feel similarly about Middle Easterners.

By contrast, just 13% feel that Russians and other immigrants from the former Soviet Union are making life worse. And just 16% feel that Asians are making life worse.

Attitudes toward immigrants have become more negative over time, at least in Middle Tennessee. In a 1998 sample of Middle Tennesseans only, 28% said Hispanics were making life worse, a number that jumped to 41% among Middle Tennesseans in the current poll. Just 4% of Middle Tennesseans in 1998 said Russians are making life worse, a figure that has risen to 14% in this poll. And 10% in 1998 said Asians were making life worse, a figure that is now 16%. Middle Easterners were not included in the 1998 poll.

Middle Tennessee seems to be the most anti-Hispanic region in the state. Compared to the 41% of Middle Tennesseans who think Hispanics make life worse, the figure is 28% in East Tennessee and 32% in West Tennessee. There is no significant difference by region for other ethnic groups.

It is worth noting that Middle Tennessee's metropolitan areas have the state's highest concentration of Hispanics, according to the 2000 U.S. Census. The state's overall Hispanic population was 2% in that count, while the Clarksville MSA proved 5% Hispanic and the Nashville MSA proved 3% Hispanic.

Education proved to be the most important factor influencing attitudes toward immigrants across the board in Tennessee, with college graduate the most accepting and high school graduates or those with less education the least. For example, 25% of those with college degrees or higher said that Hispanics have made life here worse, compared to 35% for those with some college or trade school and 43% for those with high school diplomas or less. It is also worth noting that college graduates are less likely to compete with Hispanic immigrants for jobs.

For Middle Easterners, 31% of college graduates and 36% of those with some college or trade school held negative attitudes, a figure that rose to 41% for those with high school educations or less.

Vast majority think U.S. immigration policy too open

Given these findings regarding immigrants and the quality of life, it is not surprising that an overwhelming majority of Tennesseans think that U.S. immigration policy is too lax. Nearly three-fourths of Tennesseans (74%) think that the U.S. is too open to immigrants. This figure is similar to that found in a September poll by the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, where 71% rated the national policy too open.

Just five in 100 Tennesseans (5%) think the nation is too closed, and only 16% believe that the U.S. government's policy is about right.

Political orientation plays an important role regarding immigration policy. Fully 77% of self-identified middle-of-the-roaders, conservatives, and people from both the far left and far right (84% of the sample) believe the policy is too open. On the other hand, 56% of liberals and those who did not respond to the political orientation question (16% of the sample) believe the policy is too open.

Attitude toward Iraq invasion complex

The vast majority of Tennesseans seem comfortable with an invasion of Iraq if the United Nations supports the move. When first asked directly whether they favor sending ground troops to Iraq, a majority of Tennesseans (54%) agree, but only about one-third (35%) support such invasion if the U.N. opposes the move. With U.N. support, more than two-thirds (68%) favor an invasion of Iraq. Like most issues, Tennessee opinion regarding Iraq is not one-dimensional.

A recent U.N. Security Council resolution gives Iraq an ultimatum to disarm or face military consequences but does not authorize unilateral U.S. action. But whether other countries support or oppose an invasion makes little difference. If other nations back such an invasion, 57% say they would support the move. If other countries are in opposition, support drops only three percentage points (54%).

By comparison, a late October Gallup survey found that 54% of all Americans favor such an invasion, a figure that has remained constant over the previous three months. And, in late September, Gallup found that 79% of Americans would favor such an invasion with U.N. support, but only 37% with U.N. opposition. Thus, given differences in time frame and methodology, Tennessee opinion closely parallels national opinion.

Economic pessimism on the rise

Tennesseans have grown substantially more pessimistic since spring about both the national economy and their personal finances. Overall, 56% of state residents say the national economy is getting worse – a substantial increase in pessimism since March, when 41% perceived a declining national economy. Nationwide, a Gallup poll concluded Nov. 3 found that 51 percent of Americans see a worsening national economy. Meanwhile, the proportion of state residents who say their personal finances are likely to worsen during the upcoming year has risen from 17% in the spring to 23%.

Those on the political right are for more optimistic about the national economy than moderates or those on the left. Nearly half (43%) of those calling themselves “conservative” or “far right” say the national economy is on its way up. Among moderates

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and those who are “liberal” or “far left,” only 22% agree. On the right, registered, active voters are the most optimistic. Among moderates and people on the left, those earning less than \$50,000 are the least optimistic, especially females.

Views about personal finances, meanwhile, are strongly tied to age and education. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those age 49 or younger think their personal finances will improve compared to under half (42%) of those age 50 or older. And among the younger Tennesseans, those with at least some college training are significantly more optimistic than those with only a high school degree or less.

Crossreferencing views on both the national economy and one’s personal finances reveals that basically three different outlooks prevail among Tennesseans. About a quarter (22%) say that both the national economy and their personal finances are improving. But roughly another quarter (20%) foresee a downturn both in the national economy and in their personal finances. Still another quarter or so (22%) say the national economy is worsening, but their personal finances are on the upswing. Those in the remaining quarter are most apt to say that the national economy is worsening while their personal finances hold steady (10%) or that the national economy is holding steady while their personal fortunes improve (9%). The rest generally aren’t sure about one, the other, or both.

About one in two state residents (52%) report owning investments affected by recent drops in the stock market. Of those earning more than \$50,000 a year, about one in three (75%) reported an effect compared to 49% of those earning \$25,000 to \$50,000, 40% of those earning \$15,000 to \$20,000, and 23% of those earning less than \$15,000.

And in what may be a response both to the jittery economy and to recent revelations about deceptive accounting practices at several large U.S. corporations, the percentage of Tennesseans expressing “hardly any” confidence in major companies quadrupled from 7% a year ago to 28%. Sixty percent reported “only some” confidence in major companies, and only 9% said they had “a great deal” of confidence. A year ago, 54% answered “only some,” and 32% chose “a great deal.” In the current poll, banks and financial institutions inspired “a great deal” of confidence for 29% of the population, “only some” for 51%, and “hardly any” for 17%. The rest weren’t sure.

“God bless America” no cliché, but meaning more patriotic than religious

Is the phrase “God bless America” a cliché? Not for most Tennesseans. Two-thirds (68%) say the phrase is “very meaningful.” This was especially true for those calling themselves born-again Christians or Evangelicals (77%). However, less than one-third (29%) use the phrase “often” (22%) or “all the time” (8%). Born again evangelicals are more likely to use it (37%)—especially those older than 50 years of age (50%).

Among those who use the phrase “God bless America,” most (85%) say they began using it before Sept. 11, 2001. Those in East Tennessee were even more likely (96%) to report a long history with the phrase.

Ever wonder who buys those car flags and stickers with “God bless America” written on them? One-fourth (27%) of Tennesseans say they have purchased products with the phrase on it. Lower and middle income residents of Middle and East Tennessee were more likely (40%) to buy such items, as were those with less education (52%).

But the phrase is interpreted more in a patriotic than a religious sense. When President George W. Bush ends a speech with “God bless America,” most Tennesseans believe he means something patriotic (42%), while fewer think it is a religious statement (19%).

National security drives foreign policy attitudes, but altruism also important

Protecting national economic and military security ranks as Tennesseans’ most important foreign policy goal, and respondents are unified regardless of gender, age, political orientation, racial group, or religious choice.

Nearly nine in 10 (89%) said strengthening the economy was very important, followed by promoting and defending U.S. security (87%), protecting American jobs (also 87%), and combating terrorism (83%).

Securing the energy supply (66%), limiting the military power of other nations (50%), and strengthening friendly countries (37%) ranked markedly lower among national economic and military security items. Interestingly, U.S. economic interests are valued here more than military security, although the relation is close.

A group¹ of issues representing altruistic foreign policy goals rated second in general priority. Keeping world peace was rated very important by 65% of Tennesseans, followed by promoting human rights (65%), combating world hunger (54%), fostering international cooperation (55%), and arms control (53%). Strengthening the United Nations was rated very important by less than a majority (45%), followed by protecting weaker nations (37%).

Women are significantly more supportive of altruistic foreign policy goals than men. For example, 70% of women and just over half of men (54%) agreed that promoting human rights was a very important goal. More than half of women (58%) feel that strengthening the U.N. is very important, compared to about one-third of men (35%).

A third group of issues centered on American political and economic values. Here, defending allies (54% very important) led the way, followed by protecting American business (44%), strengthening friendly countries (37%), spreading democracy (30%), and promoting capitalism (18%). Oddly, launching preemptive strikes to preserve international security – rated as very important by just under half (49%) – also fell into this group. With promoting American political and economic values, political party proved important, with Republicans (44% of the sample) significantly more favorable than Democrats and independents (54%).

Appendix A: Measuring attitudes in polls

Attitudes toward many issues – such as taxes, military actions, or immigrants – are complex. The same person may hold several contradictory notions and balance them off against each other to determine an overall attitude.

¹ A statistical technique, factor analysis, was used to examine the intercorrelations of 19 different questions and group them into three indices, representing political and military security, altruism, and economic cooperation.

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For example, in forming an attitude toward abortion, the same person may believe that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control. When asked bluntly whether he or she is in favor of abortion, that person might reply, “No.” But the same person could also believe that abortion is acceptable in cases of incest, rape, or defects in the fetus.

To learn the person's attitude, a survey researcher must therefore ask more than one question, then report the results in all their complexity. Complexity, however, is shunned by many candidates. Lobbyists and interest groups may campaign as if an issue is “black or white” when, for many people, it is both black and white.

The same process is true for issues like the state income tax or a proposed invasion of Iraq. Asking one question rarely elicits the complexity of an underlying attitude. Thus, good survey researchers employ multiple questions asked over time to establish trends.

Appendix B: 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%