

Summary of Findings on National Issues, Fall 2005

Bush's approval rating sags in Tennessee. Just 40% of Tennesseans say they approve of how George W. Bush is handling his job as president, a steep decline from last spring's 55% approval of Bush. *Contact: Ken Blake*

Tennessee barometer trumps nation barometer. The MTSU Poll reports two new "barometers" to measure Tennesseans' mood regarding the state and nation. The state barometer stands at 51 out of 100, while the national scale is 34. *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

Tennesseans want change in the White House and maybe Congress. A solid majority (61%) of Tennesseans say they would like the next president to offer policies and programs different from those offered by Bush. Although 36% would like to see Republicans in control of Congress, 40% would prefer control by Democrats, and 21% don't know. *Contact: Ken Blake*

Tennessee would be no "gimme" for a White-House-minded Frist. Only about a quarter of Tennesseans (24%) say they would choose Frist over "the Democratic candidate" if Frist were to run for president. A sizable 43% say they don't know. *Contact: Ken Blake*

Pessimism rises on Bush's ability to achieve political goals. Tennesseans have grown substantially more pessimistic since last spring about Bush's chances of accomplishing each of a dozen selected political goals. *Contact: Ken Blake*

War in Iraq No. 1 national problem. The war in Iraq was named the No. 1 national problem by more than one-fifth (21%) of Tennesseans. *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

Tennesseans divided about whether troops to Iraq a mistake. For the first time, more say sending troops to Iraq was a mistake (49%) than the reverse (45%). *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

Most dissatisfied with course of country. Nearly two-thirds (64%) are not happy with the way things are going now in the country. Again, divisions are apparent by candidate preference in the 2004 election. *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

National economy rated poor or fair. More than one-fourth of Tennesseans rate the national economy poor, and another 43% report that it is only fair. And again, 2004 candidate preference is the best predictor. *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

Other topics: Polarization marks handling of Supreme Court nominations • Many feel gas pump pinch, but especially the poor • State split along party lines regarding Hurricane Katrina response.

Details of National Findings, Fall 2005

Bush's approval rating sags in Tennessee

Contact: Ken Blake

Just 40% of Tennesseans say they approve of how George W. Bush is handling his job as president, a steep decline from the 55% approval of Bush observed last spring. Nationally, Bush's approval rate is hovering at about the same level.

Not surprisingly, approval in Tennessee is lowest among self-described Democrats (13%), followed by independents (34%) and Republicans (74%). Echoing a pattern observed in previous MTSU Poll installments, Bush's popularity in Tennessee divides sharply along racial and religious lines. Specifically, 44% of whites approve of Bush compared to 16% of minorities. And among whites, 49% of self-described evangelical Christians approve of Bush compared to 29% of those who do not identify with the term. Last spring, Bush's approval rating stood at 69% among white evangelical Christians, 61% among whites in general, 39% among whites who were not evangelical Christians, and 22% among minorities. The comparison reveals that Bush has lost substantial ground even among groups that historically have given him high levels of approval.

Attitudes toward the war in Iraq and the federal response to Hurricane Katrina emerge as strong factors in approval of Bush as well. Only 16% of those who say sending U.S. troops to Iraq was a mistake approve of Bush compared to 69% of those who say sending troops to Iraq was not a mistake. The percentages are identical for those who disapprove and approve, respectively, of how Bush is handling the response to Hurricane Katrina. And among those who disapprove of Bush's handling of appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court, only 11 percent approve of Bush compared to 65% of those who approve of Bush's handling of Supreme Court appointments.

Rating of Tennessee barometer trumps nation barometer

Contact: Bob Wyatt

The MTSU Poll is now reporting two new "barometer" indexes to measure Tennesseans' mood regarding the state of the state and the state of the nation. These three-item indices are calculated from attitudes toward the governor or the President, the state or the national economy, and "how things are going" in Tennessee or the nation. The top score is 100.

The Tennessee barometer now stands at 51, while the national barometer stands at 34.

The best predictor of the Tennessee barometer is income, with people making more than \$50,000 scoring the state 67, compared to 45 for those with lower incomes.

Nationally, the rating is best predicted by pure political allegiance. Republicans and independents leaning toward Democrats rate the national barometer at 65, compared to independents with no party lean at 32. Democrats and independents leaning Republican rate the national barometer at only 7.

These results indicate that those who rate the state of the state and nation high tend to inhabit separate economic and political worlds.

The MTSU Poll reported a state barometer once before, in spring 2003, when the index stood at 53, not much of a difference from the current 51

Tennesseans want change in the White House, and maybe Congress

Contact: Ken Blake

A solid majority (61%) of Tennesseans say they would like the next president to offer policies and programs different from those offered by Bush. Only about a third (32%) want someone with policies similar to Bush's. Six percent don't know, and the rest refuse to answer. A notable 33% of Republicans say they want someone with policies and programs different from Bush's. The figure is 68% among independents, and 86% among Democrats. Nationwide, an Oct. 6-10, 2005 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that 69% want a change from Bush's policies and programs, while 25% do not, and 6% don't know.

Behind party differences, 80% of Tennessee's minorities want a change, compared to 57% of the state's whites. Among minorities, people age 34 and younger want change more than do older people. And among whites, income is the key predictor, with 68% of those earning \$25,000 a year or less wanting change compared to half (50%) of those earning more.

Issue attitudes figure prominently here, too, with change hoped for by 82% of those who disapprove of Bush's handling of the Hurricane Katrina response compared to 34% of those who approve of Bush's handling of the response to the storm. Iraq war attitudes are close behind in significance. Eight-five percent of those who consider sending troops to Iraq a mistake want a change, compared to 38% of those who do not think sending troops was a mistake. Among those who disapprove of Bush's handling of appointments to the U.S. Supreme Court, 88% want change. By contrast, among those who approve of Bush's Supreme Court appointments, only 34% want change. No differences were evident between self-described registered voters and others.

In a similar vein, Tennesseans register ambivalence about which party they would like to see control Congress after the midterm elections in 2006. Thirty-six percent would like to see Republicans in control of Congress, 40% would prefer control by Democrats, and 21% don't know. The rest decline to answer. Nationally, 37% of Americans would prefer Republican control of Congress, 48% would prefer Republican control, and 15% are unsure, according to an NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll conducted Nov. 4-7. Democrats and Republicans alike solidly prefer a Congress controlled by their respective parties, but independents prefer Democratic control (39%) over Republican control (26%). A notable 31% of independents are undecided on the question, and the rest decline to answer.

Income predicts these attitudes better than any of the other demographics. Among those earning \$25,000 a year or less, a plurality (38%) prefer a Democrat-controlled Congress. Twenty-seven percent want the Republicans in charge, and 29% don't know. Meanwhile, a near majority (46%) of those earning up to \$50,000 a year prefer Democratic control of Congress, while a third (34%) of Tennesseans in this income range prefer Republican control, and 15% don't know. Among the wealthiest Tennesseans – those earning more than \$50,000 a year – a majority (51%) prefer Republican control, less than a third (31%) want Democratic control, and 17% don't know. Again, no differences appeared between self-described registered voters and others.

Tennessee would be no "gimme" for a White-House-minded Frist

Contact: Ken Blake

Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist may have some work to do in his home state should he decide to make a run for the White House in the next election. Only about a quarter of Tennesseans (24%) say they would choose Frist over "the Democratic candidate." Another 22% say they would pick the Democratic candidate, and a sizable 43% say they don't know. Eleven percent

say they would not vote for either one, and the rest decline to answer. Frist, whose name is sometimes mentioned as a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2008, has not ruled out a presidential bid.

About half (51%) of Republicans say they would pick Frist over a Democratic nominee. About a third (36%) say they don't know, and 9% say "neither one." Just 4% would choose the Democratic nominee. Among independents, most (54%) say they don't know whom they would pick. But 16% say they would go for Frist, and 16% say they would go for the Democratic nominee. Eleven percent say "neither one," and the rest decline to answer. Mirroring their counterparts on the right, about half (52%) of Democrats say they would choose the Democratic nominee, a third (31%) don't know, 9 percent would choose Frist, and 8% would choose neither one.

Pessimism rises on Bush's ability to achieve political goals

Contact: Ken Blake

Tennesseans have grown substantially more pessimistic since last spring about Bush's chances of accomplishing each of a dozen selected political goals, and optimism is much more rare than it was nationally at the start of Bush's first and second terms (See Table 1). In particular, most Tennesseans still think Bush will be able to improve the country's military security. But only half think he'll be able to improve education, and under half think he'll be able to accomplish the remaining goals (See Table 2).

As one might expect, Republicans show more optimism than do Democrats and independents when estimating Bush's chances of accomplishing these goals. Majorities of state Republicans think Bush can improve military security (80%), keep America prosperous (73%), improve education (72%), improve moral values (70%), increase respect for the presidency (66%), and improve respect for the United States abroad (52%). Under half of Republicans think Bush will be able to accomplish any of the remaining goals. Among independents, over half think he can improve military security (53%), but under half think he can accomplish any of the remaining goals. And none of the goals receives a favorable prediction from a majority of Democrats.

Behind party loyalties, differences in optimism appear along demographic lines. For example, more men (66%) than women (47%) think Bush will be able to improve the country's military security, and while 53% of Tennesseans age 49 and younger think Bush will be able to improve education, only 44% of Tennesseans older than 49 agree. A near majority of whites (47%) think Bush will be able to keep the country prosperous, but less than a third (31%) of minorities agree. Forty-seven percent of self-described evangelical Christians say Bush can improve the country's moral values compared to just 31% of non-evangelicals.

**Table 1:
Estimates of Bush's ability to accomplish selected goals
U.S. & Tennessee, 2001 - 2005**

Question: Will Bush be able to ...	Pct. "Yes"			
	U.S. Jan. 2001	U.S. Jan. 2005	TN Feb. 2005	TN Oct. 2005
Improve military security for country	81%	73%	69%	57%
Improve education	66	58	56	50
Keep America prosperous	63	62	59	44
Improve moral values in U.S.	55	57	46	41
Increase respect for the presidency	61	54	50	37
Cut your taxes	49	---	40	32
Improve respect for the U.S. abroad	58	50	45	31
Improve quality of the environment	42	39	38	30
Improve healthcare system	46	44	37	25
Ensure long-term strength of Medicare	49	42	37	24
Ensure long-term strength of Social Security	50	40	34	23
Heal political divisions in country	41	33	42	16

**Table 2:
Tennesseans' estimates of Bush's ability
to accomplish selected goals
Fall 2005**

Question: Will Bush be able to ...	Will	Will not	Don't know/ refused
Improve military security for country	57%	37%	6%
Improve education	50	43	7
Keep America prosperous	44	45	11
Improve moral values in U.S.	41	49	10
Increase respect for the presidency	37	54	9
Cut your taxes	32	57	11
Improve respect for the U.S. abroad	31	60	9
Improve quality of the environment	30	59	11
Improve healthcare system	25	64	11
Ensure long-term strength of Medicare	24	62	14
Ensure long-term strength of Social Security	23	63	14
Heal political divisions in country	16	72	12

War in Iraq No. 1 national problem

Contact: Bob Wyatt

The war in Iraq was named the No. 1 national problem by more than one-fifth (21%) of Tennesseans. And the main predictor of Iraq as the top problem is the candidate respondents report voting for in the 2004. Among Bush voters, just 15% name Iraq, compared the 26% of Kerry voters and 27% who voted for someone else or did not vote.

Sharp divisions are quite evident here and elsewhere. Among Bush voters, 15% also name moral and family values the top problem, compared to just 3% of Kerry voters and 11% of others. In fact, 22% of Kerry voters and 16% of others name President Bush as the top problem, compared to 4% of Bush voters.

For the record, 42% of our respondents reported voting for Bush, 33% for Kerry, 3% for someone else, while 20% said they did not vote.

Near majority think sending troops to Iraq a mistake

Contact: Bob Wyatt

The dramatic and recent national shift in attitudes toward the war in Iraq is also evident in Tennessee.

Fully 49% of Tennesseans now believe that sending troops to Iraq was a mistake, up from 45% in last spring's MTSU Poll. This compares to 53% nationally who said that sending troops was a mistake in a late-October Gallup Poll. But Tennessee opinion is still narrowly divided, with 45% saying it was not a mistake, down from 50% in the spring.

Tennesseans are, of course, polarized here, with fully 84% of those identified as strong Republicans saying sending troops was not a mistake, compared to 86% of strong Democrats saying that it was. Independents go against sending troops 50% to 40%, with the rest undecided.

Tennesseans overestimate the percentage of people nationally who would say sending troops was a mistake, while underestimating the number of their fellow Tennesseans who would agree. Tennesseans believe that most U.S. citizens (59%) would say that sending troops was a mistake – a figure that reaches 86% among strong Democrats. Gallup's figures, however, indicate that 53% consider sending troops a mistake nationally. In the state, however, they estimate that 43% consider sending troops a mistake, while our figures show the actual percentage to be 49%.

A near majority of Tennesseans now think that Saddam Hussein was not responsible for the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on U.S. soil. But 38% of Tennesseans believe that he was responsible. In fact, there has never been any proof that he was. Last spring, 40% said Hussein was not responsible while 38% said that he was, indicating that the shift has come from those who were once undecided.

Fully 45% of Tennesseans say they follow news about Iraq closely, and a similar number say that they talk about the war often. Whites (49%) were more likely to talk often about the war than blacks (21%).

Most who talk about the war, however, speak with people who agree with their own views. For example, 77% of those who say it was a mistake say they mostly talk to people with the same view. Only 59% of those who say it was not a mistake, however, say they talk to those who agree, indicating perhaps that more disagree with them than agree or that they are more strident in their opinions.

Asked whether they would state their own opinion about the war to a stranger who disagrees with them, 45% opted for silence and 44% said they would speak out. Women (53%) were more likely to remain silent than men (36%).

Most dissatisfied with course of country, division sharp according to 2004 vote

Contact: Bob Wyatt

If Tennesseans are not universally sour on Bush, nearly two-thirds (64%) are not happy with the way things are going now in the country – a sharp contrast with their assessment of Tennessee, where 42% express dissatisfaction.

Still, nearly a majority of Bush voters (47%) say they are satisfied, while nearly all of Kerry voters and those who voted for someone else (94%) are dissatisfied. Among those who did not vote or did not answer, 68% are dissatisfied.

National economy rated lower than state economy

Contact: Bob Wyatt

More than one-fourth of Tennesseans rate the national economy poor, and another 43% report that it is only fair. But 27% do opt for good, while only 3% say excellent. Again, 2004 candidate preference is the best predictor, with 38% of Kerry voters and others opting for poor and 48% for fair. Just 12% choose good and less than 1 percent (.57%) choose excellent. Among Bush voters, only 13% choose poor and 37% choose fair, while 45% say good and 6% excellent.

Polarization marks Bush's handling of Supreme Court nominations

Contact: Bob Wyatt

Because our poll took place between Oct. 24 and Nov. 4 – a time in which Harriet Miers withdrew her nomination and President Bush nominated Samuel Alito – we asked respondents only how they viewed Bush's handling of appointments to the Supreme Court.

Again, polarization was evident, with 39% approving and 37% disapproving. Disapproval was as high as 70% for strong Democrats and as low as 7% for strong Republicans. Interview date itself had no effect on response, indicating that the partisanship and not the actual nominee was the motivating issue.

A third (33%) of our respondents preferred a conservative nominee, while 38% opted for a neutral nominee and only 10% for a liberal. Fully 59% Republicans and Democrat-leaning independents chose conservative 59% of the time, while 56% of strong Democrats and Republican-leaning independents opted for neutral nominee.

Respondents were also less likely to argue with a stranger who disagreed about Supreme Court nominations than they were about the war in Iraq. Here, fully 59% would not respond to a disagreeing stranger, compared to 45% who would not respond on Iraq. Again, gender proved significant, with 66% of females opting for no response compared to 51% of males.

Here, 41% guess that most people in the nation would disapprove of Bush's handling of the nomination, while they estimate that only 32% of Tennesseans would disapprove. Thus, they judge the state to be more supportive of the process than the nation.

Just 21% said they often talked about the Supreme Court nomination, while 21% said seldom and 22% never. Again, those who would talk spoke overwhelmingly with others who agree with them, with 74% of those approving and 64% of those disapproving speaking to compatible people.

Many feel the gas pump pinch, but especially the poor

Contact: Ken Blake

A majority of Tennesseans (58%) say they are driving less because of the high cost of gasoline, and just under half say gasoline costs have caused a financial hardship for them. And although

a plurality (40%) expect the cost of gasoline to fall over the next few months, 29% expect gasoline costs to stay the same, and 26% expect gasoline costs to rise.

Although there is plenty of gas pump pain to go around, poorer Tennesseans have felt it the most. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of state residents earning \$25,000 or less per year say they have cut back on driving compared to just over half (54%) of those earning more. Similarly, among Tennesseans age 64 or younger, 67% of those earning \$40,000 a year or less say gas prices have caused a financial hardship for them compared to just over a third (37%) of such Tennesseans earning over \$40,000 a year. Among Tennesseans age 65 or older, only 29% say gas prices have caused a financial hardship for them – perhaps because this group tends to do less driving. Lower-income Tennesseans – specifically, those earning \$25,000 a year or less – are also more pessimistic than wealthier Tennesseans about the future of gasoline prices. Thirty-four percent of these poorer Tennesseans think gas prices will continue to rise compared to just 19% of wealthier state residents.

State split along party lines regarding Hurricane Katrina response

Contact: Ken Blake

Forty-eight percent of Tennesseans disapprove of how Bush is handling the response to Hurricane Katrina. Another 44% approve, and the rest don't know or decline to answer. Almost three-fourths (73%) of Republicans approve, and about a quarter (23%) disapprove. The rest don't know. Among independents, 46% approve, 51% disapprove, and the rest don't know or decline to answer. A scant 15% of Democrats approve, and 75% disapprove, while the rest don't know or decline to answer. Behind party loyalties, race is the strongest factor, with just 16% of minorities approving compared to 49% of whites. Among minorities, people age 34 or younger express more disapproval than do those who are older. And among whites, people earning \$25,000 or less express more disapproval than people earning over \$25,000.

Over half (57%), though, feel either "very confident" (17%) or "somewhat confident" (40%) about the federal government's ability to handle a major disaster in the future. Over a quarter (26%) feel "not too confident," and another 15% feel "not at all confident." The rest don't know or refuse to answer. In a nearly identical pattern, 60% feel either "very confident" (17%) or "somewhat confident" (43%) in their state and local governments' ability to handle such a disaster. About a quarter (24%) feel "not too confident," and 11% feel "not at all confident." The rest don't know or decline to answer.

Party loyalty predicts the assessments of the federal government's readiness but not assessments of state and local governments' readiness. Three-fourths (75%) of Republicans are either "very confident" (27%) or "somewhat confident" (48%) in the federal government's ability to handle a major disaster. Among Democrats and independents, though, a little over a third (39%) are either "very confident" (14%) or "somewhat confident" (35%). On the question of state and local preparedness, though, gender is the top predictor, with men more likely to be "very confident" (21%) or "somewhat confident" (49%) than women, 16% of whom are "very confident," and 43% of whom are "somewhat confident."

About four in 10 state residents (45%) think the federal government should pay for Hurricane Katrina cleanup by cutting spending on the Iraq war. About 14% favor covering the tab with deficit spending, 12% prefer raising taxes, 6% would cut spending on domestic programs, and a sizable 23% say they simply don't know how the federal government should pay for the cleanup. The rest decline to answer.

Again, party loyalties best predict how Tennesseans answer the question. Most Democrats (60%) and a plurality of independents (45%) favor cutting spending on the Iraq war. The top

answer among Republicans is “Don’t know” (32%) followed but cutting spending on the war (27%).

A little over half of Tennesseans (51%) think African Americans had just as much opportunity as whites to flee New Orleans before the city flooded. Thirty-seven percent think African Americans had less opportunity to flee than whites, and 9% don’t know. Only 2% think African Americans had more opportunities to flee that did whites, and the rest decline to answer.

And yet again, responses cluster along party lines. Two-thirds (66%) of Republicans think African Americans had the same chance as whites to flee. By contrast, only 48% of independents and 37% of Democrats think opportunities to flee were equally available to whites and African American in New Orleans. Among Democrats, whites were more likely than minorities to see equal opportunities. And among independents, better-educated individuals were less likely than lesser-educated individuals to see equal opportunities.

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.

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 either “No” or “Yes.” This is because the same person could also believe that abortion is acceptable in cases of incest, rape, or serious 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.

Appendix B: Evangelicalism in Tennessee

The label “Evangelical” is claimed by subgroups within a wide array of Christian types including Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Lutherans, and more. To complicate matters, many self-described Evangelicals attend non-denominational churches, and still others hold Evangelical beliefs and exhibit Evangelical behaviors without identifying with or even recognizing the term “Evangelical.” In short, Evangelicalism is an abstraction, and there is no perfect way to measure it. But whatever it is, Evangelicalism is a strong force in Tennessee politics, and an interpretation of Tennessee attitudes would be incomplete without some attempt to account for it.

The MTSU Poll assesses Evangelicalism by asking individuals whether they consider themselves an “Evangelical or born-again” Christian and also by measuring three themes often found in Evangelical belief and practice: Belief that the Bible is the “actual word of God” and should be “taken literally, word for word,” belief that “Jesus will return to earth and take all true Christians to heaven, leaving non-Christians here to face tribulation and the Antichrist,” and a personal history of having “tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior.” In Tennessee, all three measures correlate positively and strongly – although not perfectly – with self-identification as an Evangelical, and when one or more of these measures emerges as a significant predictor, the predictor is assumed to accurately characterize the attitudes of Evangelicals.

Appendix C: Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Oct. 24 through Nov. 4, 2005, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 608

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.

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. Here are the Census data, the sample data, and the weights:

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	29.3%	19.9%	1.47	30.2%
35-49	29.9%	27.3%	1.09	29.1%
50-64	24.2%	28.0%	0.86	23.6%
65+	16.7%	24.8%	0.67	17.1%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Race:				
White	83.6%	87.7%	0.95	81.6%
Black	15.1%	8.2%	1.84	16.8%
Other	1.3%	4.2%	0.31	1.6%
	100.0%	100.1%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	45.9%	1.03	47.7%
Female	52.5%	54.1%	0.97	52.3%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Small variations in reported percentages (1% or less) sometimes result for rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights.