

## Summary of Findings on State Issues, Fall 2005

**Health issues No. 1 for whites; education for blacks.** Concern over health service and health insurance remains Tennesseans' No. 1 problem, with 29% naming this in an open ended question. But 25% of African Americans named education the top problem. *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

**Half satisfied with the way things are going, fewer like economy.** More than half (51%) are satisfied with the direction of the state, down from 61% last spring. Fully 42% said economic conditions in Tennessee are "only fair," and another 18% rated them "poor." *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

**Legislature approval down, especially among followers of "Tennessee Waltz" news.** Only about a third (34%) of Tennesseans approve of the job the state Legislature is doing, down from 45% last spring. Attention to news about "Operation Tennessee Waltz" correlates strongly with low approval of the Legislature. *Contact: Ken Blake*

**About half of Tennesseans following news about "Tennessee Waltz."** Just under half (48%) of Tennesseans report following news about "Operation Tennessee Waltz" either "very closely" (17%) or "fairly closely" (31%). Older Tennesseans have been following the story more closely than younger ones. Three of four proposals for improving ethics in state government receive majority support. *Contact: Ken Blake*

**TennCare cuts will hurt, should be avoided, most Tennesseans say.** A solid majority (56%) of Tennesseans oppose Gov. Phil Bredesen's plan to cut about 190,000 adults from TennCare. Wealthier Tennesseans express more approval than poorer ones. Most state residents predict that either "nearly none" (39%) or "only some (36%) of those cut from the program will "find some other way of meeting their essential medical needs." *Contact: Ken Blake*

**Bredesen's approval rating absolutely up, but relatively down.** A majority of Tennesseans still like the job Gov. Phil Bredesen is doing, but his current 52% approval rating represents a 10-percentage-point drop from 62% in the spring. *Contact: Ken Blake*

**Plurality approve of Frist and Alexander, but many don't know.** Just under half of Tennesseans approve of Republican Tennessee senators Bill Frist (47%) and Lamar Alexander (41%). But in both cases, about a third don't know. *Contact: Ken Blake*

**Tennesseans overestimate state poverty rate, see themselves as "haves."** Respondents guessed that 37% of the state falls below the poverty line, but the Census Bureau puts the rate at 15%. Nearly two-thirds (63%) said they were "haves," but 23% chose "have-not." *Contact: Bob Wyatt*

## Details of State Findings, Fall 2005

### **Health issues remain No. 1 state problem for whites, education for blacks and others**

*Contact: Bob Wyatt*

Perceived concerns over health service and health insurance remain Tennesseans' No. 1 problem, with 29% naming this issue off the top of their heads in an open-ended question. With open-ended questions, an issue rarely receives mention by more than 20% of respondents, indicating just how salient health concerns are for Tennesseans.

In our spring 2005 poll, however, fully 34% of Tennesseans named health concerns as the top issue. Education was named the major issue by 13%, down from 16% in the spring.

As in the spring, there were sharp racial differences in response to the state's No. 1 issue. While one-fourth of African Americans and others named education first, just 10% of whites agreed. One-third of whites, however, named health issues, compared with only 10% of African Americans and others.

### **Half satisfied with the way things are going in Tennessee, fewer like economy**

*Contact: Bob Wyatt*

More than half (51%) of Tennesseans are satisfied with the direction of the state, down from 61% in our spring survey. There are, however, no racial, sexual, or other demographic predictors of this attitude.

Fully 42% said economic conditions in Tennessee are "only fair," and another 18% rated them "poor." Just 2% opted for "excellent," while 36% chose "good." Again, racial divisions are sharp, with 37% of African Americans opting for poor, compared to only 14% of whites and others. These ratings are little changed from spring 2005, when 46% found economic conditions fair and 14% poor.

### **Legislature approval down, especially among followers of "Tennessee Waltz" news**

*Contact: Ken Blake*

Only about a third (34%) of Tennesseans approve of the job the state Legislature is doing, down from 45% last spring. Respondents' reported attention to news about "Operation Tennessee Waltz," the FBI sting that has resulted in corruption charges against several state and local government officials, is strongly associated with low approval of the Legislature. Specifically, only 19% of those who are following news about the scandal "very closely" approve of the Legislature, compared to 37% of those following "fairly closely" and 35% of those following less often. Approval is also significantly lower among West and Middle Tennesseans (28%) than among East Tennesseans (40%).

### **About half of Tennesseans following news about "Tennessee Waltz"**

*Contact: Ken Blake*

Just under half (48%) of Tennesseans report following news about “Operation Tennessee Waltz” either “very closely” (17%) or “fairly closely” (31%). The rest say they’re following the news either “not too closely” (21%), “not at all” (27%), or either don’t know or decline to answer.

In a pattern reflecting who does and does not attend to news media in general, older Tennesseans have been following the story more closely than younger ones. Specifically, among those age 50 or older, 28% have been following “very closely,” and 34% have been following “fairly closely.” Among those age 49 or younger, for comparison, 14% have been following the story “very closely,” and 35% “fairly closely.”

When asked about four of the measures that have been proposed as ways of improving ethics in state government, state residents give most of them majority support. But sizable portions say they don’t know (See Table 1).

For each of the proposed measures, support correlates positively with attention to news about the scandal. For example, the proposed measure with the lowest general-population support – banning “contingency fees” for lobbyists – draws support from 68% of those following news of the scandal “very closely.” Twenty-eight percent of those following the scandal “very closely” oppose banning contingency fees, and just 3% don’t know. But among those who say they are following news about the scandal “not closely at all,” 34% favor the measure, 27% oppose it, and 38% don’t know – the kind of pattern one would expect if people gave essentially random responses. Thus these proposed measures are popular among members of the “issue public” that is paying attention to the scandal, but that issue public has not yet expanded to include the general state population.

**Table 1:  
Tennesseans’ support for selected ethics reform proposals  
Fall 2005**

<b>Proposed measure</b>	<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
<b>Financial disclosure by lobbyists and their employers</b>	74%	10%	16%
<b>Banning cash donations to public officials</b>	57	16	27
<b>Barring lobbyists from buying meals or gifts for state officials</b>	55	28	17
<b>Banning "contingency fees" for lobbyists</b>	49	29	22

**TennCare cuts will hurt, should be avoided, most Tennesseans say**

*Contact: Ken Blake*

A solid majority (56%) of Tennesseans oppose Gov. Phil Bredesen’s plan to cut about 190,000 adults from TennCare, the state’s medical care program for the poor, disabled, and uninsurable. Only 34% approve of the cuts, 9% don’t know, and the rest decline to answer.

Responses differ most significantly across income groups, with 57% of those earning \$50,000 a year or less expressing disapproval compared to only 39% of those who earn more. Among the lower-income group, people age 64 and younger – especially those who are female – express more disapproval than those who are older. Among the higher-income group, meanwhile, more women than men express opposition to the cuts.

A plurality of 39% predict that “nearly none” of those who are cut from the program will “find some other way of meeting their essential medical needs.” Another 36% say “only some,” 13% say “most,” and 3% say “nearly all.” Not surprisingly, these perceptions are highly correlated

with attitudes toward the cuts. For example, 82% of Tennesseans who think that “nearly none” of those cut from the program will be able to find alternative sources of medical care express opposition to the cuts. By contrast, 62% of Tennesseans who think “most” or “only some” of those cut from TennCare will find alternative sources of medical care express opposition. And among Tennesseans who think “nearly all” of the disenrolled will be able to find alternatives, only 22% express opposition.

**Bredesen’s approval rating absolutely up, but relatively down**

*Contact: Ken Blake*

A majority of Tennesseans still like the job Gov. Phil Bredesen is doing, but his current 52% approval rating represents a 10-percentage-point drop from 62% in the spring.

About a quarter of Tennesseans (25%) now say they disapprove of the governor’s job performance, and another 21% say they don’t know. The rest decline to answer. Last spring, 17% disapproved of Bredesen’s performance, and 18% didn’t know.

Attitudes toward Bredesen’s proposed TennCare cuts and interest in news about “Operation Tennessee Waltz” seem to be key factors here. Among those who disapprove of the cuts, only 40% give the governor favorable marks on job performance. Approval drops to 32% among individuals in this group who also report following news about “Operation Tennessee Waltz” either “very” or “somewhat” closely. By contrast, among Tennesseans who disapprove of the governor’s TennCare cuts but who are following news about “Operation Tennessee Waltz” either “not very closely” or “not closely at all,” 45% approve of the governor’s job performance in general.

Meanwhile, geography and party affiliation emerge as top predictors of attitudes toward Bredesen’s general job performance among Tennesseans who do approve of his proposed TennCare cuts. Specifically, three-fourths (76%) of Tennesseans who approve of the TennCare cuts also approve of Bredesen’s overall job performance. And Bredesen earns his greatest approval rating (88%) among Tennesseans who both approve of his TennCare cuts and live either in Metro Davidson County or in one of the “doughnut” of counties contiguous to Davidson. Among Tennesseans who support TennCare cuts and live elsewhere in Tennessee, 72% approve of Bredesen’s general job performance.

Interestingly, Bredesen appeals to majorities at both ends of the political spectrum – something of a counterpoint to the stark political divisions seen across the state on national-level matters. Among self-describe “strong” Democrats, for instance, 58% approve of Bredesen’s job performance, 29% disapprove, and 8% don’t know. The rest decline to answer. Similarly, among “moderate” to “strong” Republicans, 56% approve, 27% disapprove, and the rest don’t know. But approval sags among independents and those “leaning” either toward the Democrat or Republican side, 43% of whom approve, 27% of whom disapprove, and 27% of whom don’t know.

**Plurality approve of Frist and Alexander, but many don’t know.**

*Contact: Ken Blake*

Republican Tennessee Sen. Bill Frist has the approval of just under half (47%) of Tennesseans. About a third (30%) disapprove of him, and a notable 21% don’t know. The rest decline to give an answer.

Not surprisingly in these politically polarized times, Republicans are far more likely to approve of Frist (73%) than are Democrats (29%) and Tennesseans with other or no political affiliations (41%). Behind party loyalties, though, lie racially and religiously based divisions characteristic of national political attitudes in Tennessee.

Specifically, Frist enjoys substantially more approval among whites (51%) than among minorities (29%). And, among whites, significantly more self-described evangelical Christians express approval (54%) than non-evangelicals (41%). Among all of these groups, the proportion responding "Don't know" ranges from 14% among white non-evangelicals to 31% among minorities.

Meanwhile, 41% of Tennesseans say they approve of the job Republican Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander is doing. Just under a fifth (19%) disapprove, and a sizable 37% don't know. The rest decline to answer.

As with Frist, Republicans are more likely to approve of Alexander (58%) than are Democrats and others (35%). And, also as with Frist, Alexander's approval is higher among whites (45%) than among minorities (27%) and also higher among evangelicals (45%) than among non-evangelicals (34%). Among these groups, the proportion responding "Don't know" ranges from 33% among non-evangelicals to 41% among minorities.

### **Tennesseans overestimate state poverty rate, see themselves as "haves"**

*Contact: Bob Wyatt*

After Hurricane Katrina focused the political spotlight on poverty in American, we wanted to assess what percentage of Tennesseans think of themselves as "haves" and "have-nots." We also wanted to know how Tennesseans estimated the state's poverty rate and how the state's poverty rate compared to the nation.

Overall, Tennesseans significantly overestimated the poverty rate in the state. Respondents estimated that 37% of their fellow citizens fell below the poverty line, while the Census Bureau's latest estimates put Tennessee's poverty rate at 15%.

Those with a college education produced more accurate estimates but were still not close to census figures when they guessed 30%. Respondents with some college education or below, however, guessed 41%.

Asked how our state compares to the nation, more than one-third (35%) said that Tennessee equaled the national average, and 23% even guessed that Tennessee's poverty rate fell below that of the nation. Just one-fourth guessed correctly that Tennessee's rate is higher than the nation's. The latest Census Bureau estimate nationally is 12.6%. Here, those with some college or above produced better estimates (32% higher than the nation) than those who were high school graduates or below (15%).

In assessing their own fortunes, nearly two-thirds (63%) identified themselves as "haves," while less than one-fourth (23%) chose "have-not." Not surprisingly, income was related to this assessment, with 82% making more than \$40,000 choosing "have," compared to 24% of those making between \$25,000 and \$40,000 and 30% of those making less than \$25,000.

### **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  $\pm 4$  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:

<b>Census</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Weight</b>	<b>Result</b>
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**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.