

Ken Blake, Ph.D., Acting Director, (615) 210-6187
Robert Wyatt, Ph.D., Founding Director, (615) 477-8389

E-mail: kblake@mtsu.edu
rwyatt@mtsu.edu

Summary of Findings on State Issues, Spring 2005

Unprecedented number name healthcare No. 1 state issue. More than one-third (34%) of Tennesseans name the poor state of health services and health insurance as the state's No. 1 problem – the largest margin received by any issue in the MTSU Poll's seven years. *Contact: Robert Wyatt.*

Half disapprove of TennCare reductions, but wealthier lean toward cuts. A majority of respondents disapprove of Gov. Bredesen's proposed cuts to the state's medical care program. Income is the strongest predictor of attitudes toward cutting TennCare. *Contact: Robert Wyatt.*

Tennesseans pick healthcare and education over highways. An overwhelming majority (84%) of Tennesseans believe that providing healthcare for the needy is a more important goal for the state budget than maintaining highways. And 82% consider providing education a more important goal than maintaining highways. *Contact: Robert Wyatt.*

Heavy majority prefer healthcare, education to tax cut. Fully 80% of state residents consider providing healthcare for the needy more important than a tax cut, and 80% deem education more important than a tax cut. But only a bare majority (51%) would choose maintaining highways over a tax cut. *Contact: Robert Wyatt.*

West Tennesseans grow unhappy with state's direction, economy, governor. West Tennesseans have grown unhappy with the state's overall direction, economy, and governor since the last MTSU Poll in October 2004. *Contact: Ken Blake.*

Bredesen approval still high statewide, but linked to TennCare. Statewide, 62% approve of Bredesen's performance. His rating is closely tied to support for proposed TennCare cuts. Among those who approve of the cuts, 85% approve of Bredesen's performance, compared with 47% of those who disapprove of the cuts. *Contact: Ken Blake.*

Under half approve of Legislature, lottery director. The state Legislature presently draws the approval of 45% of Tennesseans. Meanwhile, 48% say they approve of the job Rebecca Paul is doing as director of the state's lottery – a modest gain for her. In both cases, many state residents say they have no opinion. *Contact: Ken Blake.*

High-definition TV: Most have heard, but far fewer are enticed. An overwhelming majority of Tennesseans (88%) say they have heard of high-definition television. But only about a third say they would spring for the cost of the special TV set that HDTV requires. *Contact: Ken Blake.*

Details of Findings on State Issues, Spring 2005

Healthcare named by unprecedented number of Tennesseans as No. 1 state issue

Contact: Robert Wyatt

More than one-third (34%) of Tennesseans name the poor state of health services and health insurance as the state's No. 1 problem – the largest margin received by any issue in the MTSU Poll's seven years of surveying. In the fall, just 18% identified healthcare as the No. 1 issue.

The question asked is open-ended, meaning that respondents must name the No. 1 issue off the top of their head. Typically, with such a procedure, the leading issue is agreed to by 20% or fewer of respondents. A figure as high as 34% is unprecedented – and is doubtless a response to the controversy and uncertainty surrounding the fate of TennCare, the state's insurance program for the poor, the uninsurable, and those who cannot afford commercial health insurance.

Education follows healthcare as the top issue, named by 16% of respondents – down from 18% in the fall, when healthcare and education ran neck and neck.

There are marked racial differences in identification of the state's No. 1 problem. Although 38% of whites name healthcare, just 23% of minorities follow suit. Fully 19% of minorities name the poor state of education, while only 14% of whites agreed. Healthcare unseated education as the state's lead issue only last fall.

Half of Tennesseans disapprove of TennCare reductions, but wealthier lean toward cuts

Contact: Robert Wyatt

A majority (53%) of respondents disapprove of Gov. Bredesen's proposed cuts to "the state's medical care program for the poor, disabled, and uninsurable." But adding the name "TennCare" to the question for a random half of our sample reduces disapproval of Bredesen's planned cuts to 50%. Still, about half of Tennesseans disapprove of the cuts, no matter how the program is described.

More than half (52%) also say it was fair for a federal judge to put a hold on the proposed cuts. The cuts were temporarily blocked in January by U.S. District Judge William Haynes.

Just 33% approve of the cuts with TennCare not named, a number that increases to 37% when the program is named.

Regardless of question form, a respondent's income is the strongest predictor of attitudes toward TennCare. Without the TennCare name, a near majority (48%) of those making \$50,000 per year or more approve of the cuts, compared with only 21% of those who make less.

When TennCare is named, the majority (56%) of upper-income respondents approve of the cuts, compared to 19% of those making between \$15,000 and \$25,000 per year and 63% of those under \$15,000 and between \$25,000 and \$50,000. The implication is clear: Those more able to afford private insurance favor the cuts.

Tennesseans pick healthcare and education over highways by lopsided majority

Contact: Robert Wyatt

An overwhelming majority (84%) of Tennesseans believe that providing healthcare for the needy is a more important goal for the state budget than maintaining highways (8%) when asked to choose between the two. Asked to choose between providing healthcare for the needy and providing education, the gap narrows – with 41% going to healthcare and 34% to education. When providing education and maintaining highways are compared as goals, a formidable 82% opt for healthcare, with highways trailing at 8% – a gap similar to the healthcare-highway findings.

As with our open ended question, healthcare is clearly the state's No. 1 priority, followed rather closely by education.

When healthcare and highways are matched, fully 90% of females choose healthcare, compare to 79% of males. With healthcare v. education, Bush supporters opt for education with a 40% plurality, while Kerry voters and others choose healthcare with a 44% plurality. Between highways and education, those under age 35 chose education by 94%, compared to 78% of those 35 and older.

Heavy majority prefers healthcare, education to tax cut; bare majority opts for highways

Contact: Robert Wyatt

Given a choice between a tax cut and providing healthcare for the needy, fully 80% choose providing healthcare for the needy as the more important goal for the state budget. The same proportion (80%) choose education over a tax cut. But a bare majority (51%) choose highway spending over a tax cut.

There are significant differences between Bush voters and those who voted for others where providing healthcare is concerned: While 71% of Bush voters opt for healthcare for the needy, significantly more (88%) of those who voted for Kerry or other candidates choose healthcare. Party differences are also evident on the question of education vs. a tax cut. Nearly three-fourths (72%) of Republicans choose education over a tax cut compared to 87% of Democrats and Independents.

Age is important regarding maintaining highways. While about 61% of those 65 and older choose highways over a tax cut, and 58% of those 50-64 choose likewise, only 45% of those under 50 prefer highway maintenance to a tax cut. A near majority (49%) of those under 50 say they'd prefer a tax cut over maintaining highways.

West Tennesseans grow unhappy with state's direction, economy, governor

Contact: Ken Blake

West Tennesseans have grown unhappy with the state's overall direction, economy, and governor since the last MTSU Poll in October 2004.

As Table 1 shows, West Tennessee residents express significantly less satisfaction than Middle and East Tennesseans regarding both "how things are going in Tennessee at this time" and ratings of "economic conditions in Tennessee today."

**Table 1:
Attitudes toward state conditions and economy by region**

		West	Middle	East	State
Attitude toward way things are going in Tennessee at this time	Satisfied	48%	65%	63%	61%
	Dissatisfied	50	31	30	35
	No answer	2	4	7	5
Rating of economic conditions in Tennessee today	Excellent	1	2	2	2
	Good	23	47	32	36
	Only fair	52	35	52	46
	Poor	23	10	12	14
	No answer	0	6	2	3

In October, 69% of Tennessee residents reported satisfaction with how things were going in the state, and no significant regional differences were apparent. Similarly, about two in five Tennesseans in October rated the state economy as either “excellent” (2%) or “good” (39%), while just under half (45%) described the economy as “only fair,” and 12% called it poor. No significant differences were observed between West Tennesseans and the rest of the state, although Republicans held a generally more favorable view of the economy than did Independents and Democrats.

Gov. Phil Bredesen’s approval rating has taken a similar dip in West Tennessee, although income emerges as an intervening variable.

Among Tennesseans earning less than \$50,000 a year, 33% of those living in West Tennessee approve of the job Bredesen is doing as governor compared to 62% in Middle and East Tennessee. But among Tennesseans earning more than \$50,000 a year, 76% approve of Bredesen, no matter where in the state they live.

Bredesen approval still high statewide, but linked to TennCare

Contact: Ken Blake

Statewide, 62% of all Tennesseans approve of Bredesen’s performance. Just 17% disapprove, 18% don’t know, and the rest give no answer. Last fall, when Bredesen’s statewide approval rating stood at 63%, East Tennessee was Bredesen’s relative trouble spot, with 54% of East Tennesseans expressing approval compared to 70% of Middle and West Tennesseans. But controls for age largely erased the geographic differences, with older Tennesseans more favorable toward Bredesen than younger ones.

Bredesen’s approval rating is also closely tied to support for his proposed TennCare cuts. Among those who approve of Bredesen’s proposed cuts to TennCare, 85% approve of Bredesen’s performance in general. By contrast, among those who disapprove, only 47% approve of his performance in general.

It’s difficult to tell which attitude flows from the other or whether both result from some other factor. But opinions on Bredesen’s TennCare proposal predict opinions about Bredesen better than any of the demographic variables, including the geographic ones. Whatever the causal relationship between the two attitudes may be, attitudes about Bredesen and his TennCare plan are strongly related.

Under half approve of Legislature, lottery director

Contact: Ken Blake

The state Legislature presently draws the approval of 45% of Tennesseans. Just over one-quarter (28%) disapprove, and another quarter (26%) say they don't know. The rest give no answer. Approval is higher (46%) among self-described registered voters than among those who are unregistered, only 39% of whom say they approve of the Legislature.

Meanwhile, 48% of state residents say they approve of the job Rebecca Paul is doing as director of the state's lottery. About a fifth (20%) disapprove, and nearly a third (31%) don't know. The rest give no answer. Paul's approval rating has edged upward from the 41% observed last fall, perhaps owing to publicity about the lottery-funded HOPE Scholarship program, which provides college scholarships to qualified graduates of Tennessee high schools.

High-definition TV: Most have heard, but far fewer are enticed

Contact: Ken Blake

An overwhelming majority of Tennesseans (88%) say they have heard of high-definition television, an emerging technology that requires a special kind of television set but provides sharper, wider pictures and better sound than do conventional television sets receiving conventional signals. Just over one in 10 (12%) say they haven't heard of high-definition TV, and the rest aren't sure.

Knowledge of high-definition television is most common among Internet users, 91% of whom have heard of the technology, compared to 78% of those who do not use the Internet. Among Internet users, those who are younger and better educated are significantly more likely to say they have heard of HDTV than those who are older and not as educated.

But only about a third (38%) say they would buy a high-definition television set if their local TV broadcast station offered HDTV programming. And about the same proportion (35%) say they would do so if their local cable company provided HDTV programming. At present, some stations provide no high-definition programming at all, and others simulcast only some of their programming in high-definition format.

When asked whether they would be willing to pay the roughly \$850 cost of a typical 30-inch HDTV set, only about a third (31%) of Tennesseans say they would be either likely (17%) or very likely (14%) to do so. Over a quarter (28%) say they would be unlikely to do so, and over a third (37%) describe themselves as very unlikely to do so. The rest don't know.

Here again, Internet use – and possibly the general interest in technology that Internet use can reflect – is the key factor, with over a third of Internet users being either likely (19%) or very likely (16%) to pay that price for a set compared to well under a quarter (16%) of those who do not use the Internet.

Among those who would not pay \$850, a plurality (26%) say they would pay nothing or don't know how much they would pay. Among those who name a price they'd be willing to pay, the median response is \$400, a figure closer to the cost of a conventional TV set.

Appendix A: Measuring attitudes in polls

Attitudes toward many issues 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: Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 3 through Feb. 11, 2005, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 565 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	29.6%	24.0%	1.23	30.9%
35-49	30.2%	27.4%	1.10	31.1%
50-64	23.6%	26.3%	0.90	22.2%
65+	16.6%	22.3%	0.74	15.8%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Race:				
White	83.7%	87.4%	0.96	82.5%
Black	15.0%	7.5%	2.00	16.3%
Other	1.3%	4.5%	0.28	1.2%
	100.0%	99.4%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	42.7%	1.11	48.9%
Female	52.5%	57.3%	0.92	51.1%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

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