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TENNESSEANS CONFIDENT IN OBAMA, WORRIED ABOUT ECONOMY

State Legislature's approval tanks, grocery store wine sales get thumbs up

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Tennesseans have warmed to Barack Obama since November's election, express confidence in his ability and ethics, and think congressional Republicans aren't doing enough to cooperate with him, according to the latest MTSU Poll.

"New presidents typically enjoy the benefit of the doubt from the public early in their terms, even from those whose votes they didn't get," said MTSU Poll Associate Director Dr. Jason Reineke. "This is especially true during the first 100 days of a president's first term. It remains to be seen whether Tennesseans' good will toward President Obama will endure. We'll have a better sense of that after we've conducted our next poll in the fall."

The February poll of 629 randomly selected Tennessee adults also finds that while economic worries and pain are widespread and satisfaction with general state conditions is falling, satisfaction with national conditions, though low, is rising. But this goodwill and satisfaction does not extend to state government, where approval of Gov. Phil Bredesen is still high but slipping, and approval of the state Legislature has sunk to levels not seen since the Operation Tennessee Waltz scandal in 2005.

As for items on the 2009 legislative agenda, nearly two-thirds of Tennesseans support allowing grocery stores to sell wine, education tops the list of things Tennesseans think state government should spend more money on, most say abortion should be legal under certain circumstances, and opinion divides evenly on whether Tennessee should constitutionally ban a state income tax or introduce one to cut sales taxes and eliminate grocery taxes.

The poll found that 53 percent of Tennesseans now approve of Obama, even though only 42 percent of them voted for him just four months ago.

Fifty-seven percent express confidence in his administration's ability to manage American foreign policy. About as many, 59 percent, express confidence both in his administration's ability to improve the economy and to manage the federal government. And 61 percent express confidence in his administration's ethical standards. Fifty four percent of Tennesseans say Obama is doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress, but only 24 percent say congressional Republicans are doing enough to cooperate with Obama.

Tennesseans name the economy as the most pressing problem, both at the national and state levels, and two-thirds of Tennesseans say the recession has hurt them financially. Eighty-two percent say they are worried about the economy over the next few years. But the poll's 100-point mood barometer measuring approval of the president, perceived health of the national economy, and satisfaction with the nation's direction rose to 28 from last fall's all-time low of 20. The state mood barometer declined by 11 points but, now standing at 43, is notably higher than the national mood barometer.

"Overall, these results reflect deep concern about the economy but some optimism, probably stemming from confidence in Obama and the direction he is taking the country," said Dr. Robert Wyatt, director of MTSU's Office of Communication Research.

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Tennesseans seem less pleased with state-level political leaders. Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval rating remains a respectably high 52 percent, although it has dropped from 58 percent just last fall and registers well below his all-time high of 72 percent in Spring 2004.

The state Legislature fares worse. The proportion of state residents who approve of the job the Legislature is doing has slid from 39 percent to just 34 percent, a low not seen in the MTSU Poll since Spring 2006, the aftermath of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Operation Tennessee Waltz" sting that led the arrest of several state legislators on bribery charges. The lowest approval score for the Legislature in the poll's history was 33 percent in Spring 2003. Then, as now, the state was facing a recession-induced fiscal crisis.

The poll assessed public opinion on a number of issues likely to be taken up during this spring's state legislative session. For example, 62 percent of Tennesseans say grocery stores should be allowed to sell wine if they are located in areas that already allow the sale of alcoholic beverages. Education ranks highest on the list of things Tennesseans say state government isn't spending enough money on. Fifty-one percent say Tennessee is spending too little on state universities. Fifty-four percent say the same about community colleges and technical schools, and 62 percent say it about elementary and secondary education. Highway construction ranks lowest, with only 25 percent saying the state should spend more.

Furthermore, 52 percent say abortion should be legal under some circumstances, but not others. And while 46 percent of Tennesseans support amending the state's constitution to forbid a tax on personal income, a statistically equivalent 40 percent favor introducing a state income tax to lower sales taxes and eliminate taxes on groceries. A sizable 14 percent are undecided.

In still other poll findings:

- Nearly one in six Tennesseans has told a joke about Barack Obama's race, and three-fourths say they've heard or read at least one, even though only 15 percent of Tennesseans say they would find such a joke funny.
- Just over half (53 percent) of Tennesseans say sending troops to Iraq was "a mistake," while 38 percent say the move was not a mistake, and the rest aren't sure.
- Dividing sharply along party lines, about a third (37 percent) of Tennesseans would like to see Democrats control the state Legislature, but another third (33 percent) would like to see Republicans running things, and just over a quarter (27%) don't know who they'd like to see in charge of the Legislature.

Conducted Feb. 16-28 by Middle Tennessee State University's College of Mass Communication, the telephone poll of 629 randomly selected Tennessee adults has an error margin of plus or minus four percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the population within four percentage points 95 out of 100 times. For 10 years, the Survey Group at MTSU has been providing independent, non-partisan, and unbiased public opinion data regarding major social, political, and ethical issues affecting Tennessee. The poll began in 1998 as a measure of public opinion in the 39 counties comprising Middle Tennessee and began measuring public opinion statewide in 2001. Learn more and view the full report at www.mtsusurveygroup.org

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NOTE:

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