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## Summary of Tennesseans' opinions on national issues Spring 2009

**Most Tennesseans approve of Obama despite state's vote.** Fifty-three percent of Tennesseans say they approve of the job Barack Obama is doing as president. Approval breaks sharply along party lines, with 86% of Democrats approving compared to 46% of independents and 21% of Republicans. *(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

**Obama trying to be bipartisan, but Republicans aren't, Tennesseans say.** Most Tennesseans think President Obama has lived up to his pledge of bipartisanship, but they think Republicans aren't doing enough to cooperate with Obama. *(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

**Tennesseans confident in Obama on economy, foreign policy, government, and ethics.** Tennesseans are confident that the Obama administration will be able to improve the nation's economic situation, manage foreign policy and the federal government, and conduct an ethical presidency. *(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

**National barometer climbs since fall.** Tennesseans' perception of the national mood has risen to 28 out of 100, up from an all-time low of 20 in last fall's survey. And the state is polarized by political party. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

**Income best predictor of how things are going, perception of economy.** Poorer and wealthier people are more satisfied with how things are going in the nation than those in the middle. In rating the economy, 65% making \$65,000+ say poor, compared to 70% who make less. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

**No. 1 national problem: It's the economy, stupid.** Some 66% of Tennesseans name the economy the top national problem, followed distantly by moral and family values at 5%. Democrats are more likely to name the economy than centrists or Republicans. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

**Recession hurts two-thirds; older worse than younger.** About two-thirds of Tennesseans say the recession has hurt them financially. Fully 70% age 35 and older say the recession has hurt, compared to 56% of those younger. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

**Other findings:** More political knowledge equals less worry about family finances ▪ Obama race jokes common, but most Tennesseans say they're not funny ▪ Over half call Iraq War a mistake, but view of current situation improving

## **Details of Findings**

### **Tennesseans' perceptions of national issues**

### **Spring 2009**

#### **Most Tennesseans approve of Obama despite state's vote**

*(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

Fifty-three percent of Tennesseans say that they approve of how President Barack Obama has done his job so far, and only 27% of Tennesseans disapprove. In the 2008 election, 57% of Tennessee voters cast their ballots for Obama's Republican rival, John McCain, while only 42% voted for Obama.

Approval breaks sharply along party lines, with 86% of Democrats approving of Obama compared to 46% of independents and 21% of Republicans.

According to Pollster.com's aggregate of national polls as of Sunday March 1, 2009, an even larger majority of Americans in general (62%) approve of Obama so far.

#### **Obama trying to be bipartisan, but Republicans aren't, Tennesseans say**

*(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

Most Tennesseans (54%) say Obama is doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress, with only 29% saying that he isn't doing enough.

In dramatic contrast, only 24% of Tennesseans say Republicans in Congress are doing enough to cooperate with Obama, and most Tennesseans (59%) say Republicans in Congress are *not* doing enough to cooperate with Obama. Bipartisanship has been a major topic of discussion in the first months of the Obama administration

#### **Tennesseans confident in Obama on economy, foreign policy, government, and ethics**

*(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

State residents are also confident in the abilities of the Obama administration moving forward, despite the nation's difficulties.

Most Tennesseans believe the Obama administration has the ability to improve the country's economic situation. Fully 59% say they are very confident or somewhat confident in the Obama administration's ability to improve the economy, and only 35% say they are not too confident or not at all confident.

In response to a similar question asked of respondents nationally as part of a CBS News/*New York Times* poll conducted between Feb. 18 and 22, 76% of respondents said they were very or somewhat confident in President Obama's ability to make the right decisions about the economy, and only 23% said they were either not too confident or not at all confident in President Obama's ability.

When asked about foreign policy, a similar majority of Tennesseans, 57%, say they are very or somewhat confident in the Obama administration's ability to manage American foreign policy, and only 32% say they are either not too or not at all confident.

In terms of managing the federal government, 59% say they are very confident or somewhat confident in the Obama administration's abilities, while 32% say they are not too confident or not at all confident.

Further, 61% of Tennesseans say they are *very* or *somewhat confident* in the Obama administration's ethical standards, and only 30% of respondents say they are *not too* or *not at all confident* in the administration's ethical standards. Ethics is the only area where the poll identified noteworthy differences across demographics. White males age 50 and older are the only group in which a majority say they are either *not too confident* or *not at all confident* in the Obama administration's ethical standards (58%). However, this group constitutes only a small minority of Tennesseans (about 8% of respondents).

### **National barometer up markedly since fall, despite economy**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)*

Even as the recession deepens and the market dips, Tennesseans' perceptions of the national mood have brightened. Our latest national barometer has risen to 28, up from an all-time low of 20 in last fall's survey.

These results seem to reflect Tennesseans' confidence in President Obama and the direction he is taking the country, but the figure is considerably lower than our fall 2006 survey, when the score was 35.

Our national barometer, derived from one used by the Gallup Poll, is a 100-point index based on presidential approval, perceptions of the state of the economy, and satisfaction with the nation's direction.

Party affiliation is not surprisingly the best predictor of perceptions of the national mood, with strong polarization between Republicans and Democrats. Strong and moderate Democrats score the mood at 42. Centrists, including those leaning Democrat, independents with no lean, and those leaning Republican, score the mood as 30. And moderate or strong Republicans give a score of 14.

When we look at the specific components of the index, we see that 53% approve of the job Obama is doing as president, 27% disapprove, and 19% say they do not know. Here, the split along the liberal-conservative continuum is particularly acute, with 77% of liberals approving, as opposed to 60% in the middle, and only 28% among conservatives.

### **Income best predictor of how things going, perception of economy**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)*

Only 16% are satisfied with the way things are going in the nation today, while 76% are dissatisfied. And only 3% rate the current economy good or excellent. Just 27% say only fair, and 68% rate the economy poor.

When we consider the way things are going in the nation, poorer and wealthier people are actually more satisfied than those in the middle (though no one is all that satisfied). Here, among those making \$40,000 or less, 18% are satisfied and 74% are dissatisfied. For those making \$40-50,000, those figures are 15% and 82%. But for those above \$50,000, 9% are satisfied and 68% are dissatisfied.

And when we look at the current economy, 65% of those making \$65,000 and above rate the economy as poor, compared to a full 70% who make less.

**No. 1 national problem: It's the economy, stupid**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)*

Some two out of three Tennesseans (66%) name the economy as the top national problem, followed distantly by moral and family values at 5%, the wars in the Middle East at 4%, and the president at 3%.

Party affiliation is once again the best predictor of naming the economy as the top problem, with fully 80% of moderate and strong Democrats complying, compared to 65% of centrists (Democrat leaners, Republican leaners, independents) and moderate Republicans. But fewer than a majority (47%) of strong Republicans name the economy as the top problem.

Interestingly, terrorism and war are distant contenders, barely visible on the landscape of political problems.

Last fall, 53% identified the economy as the leading problem in this open-ended question. In fall 2006, the top issue was war, identified by 20%. In normal times, the top issue usually achieves about 20% mention, so our results now and in fall 2008 are exceptional.

**Recession hurts two in three; older people feel pain more**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)*

About two-thirds of Tennesseans (66%) say the recession has hurt them financially. But age, rather than income, is the best predictor of feeling the pain. Fully 70% of those 35 and older say the recession has hurt them, compared to 56% of those 34 and younger.

And 52% of those feeling the pain say it hurts a great deal, while 46% say only some. Here, there are no significant predictors.

About four in 10 (43%) say they are very worried about the economy over the next few years, with 39% somewhat worried, 12% not too worried, and 6% not worried at all.

As with perceptions of the country's future as measured in our barometer, party affiliation is the best correlate with worry about the economic future. Here, only 26% of strong or moderate Democrats are very worried, compared to 47% of true independents and those only leaning Democrat or Republican. And 56% of strong or moderate Republicans are very worried.

**More politically knowledgeable less worried about family finances**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)*

When asked about family financial worries over the next few years, just 24% are very worried, with 41% somewhat worried, 23% not too worried, and 12% not worried at all.

Interestingly, those with more political knowledge are less worried. Among the most knowledgeable 12% are very worried, compared to 25% with moderate knowledge and 34% with low political knowledge.

Political knowledge is measured on a scale including items such as the identity of the current vice president, who determines the constitutionality of a law, the percentage necessary to override a veto, which party has a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives, and which party is more conservative.

These results suggest that the knowledgeable may have longer-term economic and political views than those with lesser knowledge.

Once knowledge is disregarded, family income best predicts worry, with nearly half (48%) of those making \$15,000 or less very worried – compared to 26% making more than \$15,000 but less than \$50,000, and 17% of those making more than \$50,000.

**Obama race jokes common, even though most Tennesseans not amused**  
*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

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. The finding suggests that jokes about Obama's race have circulated widely in Tennessee despite a strong public consensus that such jokes are inappropriate.

Asked, "On about how many occasions have you told someone a joke that referred to Obama's race," 15% say they have done so at least once, with most of those saying they have done so on between one and three occasions. Substantially more Tennesseans (70%) say they have read or heard a joke referring to Obama's race on at least one occasion, with between one and four occasions being the norm.

A majority of Tennesseans say they would find a joke referring to Obama's race "definitely not humorous" (57%), while about a fifth (21%) say they'd consider such a joke "probably not humorous." Twelve percent say such a joke would be "probably humorous" to them, and 3% say it would be "definitely humorous."

Opinions grow more mixed when Tennesseans are asked how "most other people" would feel about jokes referring to Obama's race. Only a quarter (25%) say most others would find such jokes "definitely not humorous," and 30% think most others would find such jokes "probably not humorous." Another quarter (26%) think most others would find such jokes "probably humorous," and 5% opt for "definitely humorous." A significant 14% say they do not know how most others would feel about such jokes.

Most Tennesseans (58%) consider jokes about Obama's race not humorous and think most other people share their view. The next largest group (24%) finds the jokes not humorous but assumes most other people do. Another 12% find the jokes funny and assume others do as well, and just 6% find the jokes funny themselves but think most other people do not.

Men, particularly those under age 31, are more likely than women to consider jokes about Obama's race funny. Among women, younger women are more likely than older women to consider Obama race jokes funny. African Americans are significantly less likely than whites to characterize jokes about Obama's race as humorous, but other variables were better predictors, and race made no difference in perceptions of how most other people feel or in the number of jokes heard or told.

**Over half call Iraq war “a mistake,” but view of current situation improving**

*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Just over half (53%) of Tennesseans say that sending troops to Iraq was “a mistake,” while 38% say the move was not a mistake, and the rest aren’t sure. The figure has rebounded somewhat from fall 2008, when 48% of Tennesseans considered the war a mistake. Prior to fall 2008, the war had been called a mistake by a majority of Tennesseans in each MTSU Poll since fall 2006.

Assessments of how things are going for the U.S. in Iraq show a slight positive trend, though. In the Fall 2007 MTSU Poll, under half (43%) of Tennesseans thought things were going either “moderately” or “very” well for the U.S. in Iraq. The figure rose to 56% last fall and now stands at 60%, although all of the increase since last fall has occurred in the “moderately well” category.

Pessimism about U.S. fortunes in Iraq remains significant despite this trend, though. Fully 40% of Tennesseans say things are going “moderately badly” (26%) or “very badly” (14%) for the U.S. in Iraq. The rest aren’t sure or don’t answer.

As one might expect on such a partisan issue, Democrats and Republicans offer starkly different assessments of the war. Nearly three-fourths (74%) of Democrats say sending troops to Iraq was a mistake compared to just over half (53%) of independents and only about a quarter (26%) of Republicans. Among both Republicans and independents, wealthier people are more likely than poorer people to call the war a mistake. Similarly, 58% of Democrats say the things are presently going badly for the U.S. in Iraq, compared to 38% of independents and just 23% of Republicans.

**Sample and method**

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 16-28, 2009 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 629 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of  $\pm 4\%$ age 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%age 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 estimates 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>
<b>Age:</b>				
<b>18-34</b>	29.8%	15.1%	1.98	29.8%
<b>35-49</b>	28.7%	23.8%	1.21	28.8%
<b>50-64</b>	24.5%	34.9%	0.70	24.4%
<b>65+</b>	16.9%	26.2%	0.65	17.0%
<b>Race:</b>				
<b>White</b>	82.1%	88.0%	0.93	84.7%
<b>Black</b>	15.5%	7.6%	1.00	10.4%
<b>Other</b>	2.4%	4.5%	1.00	4.9%
<b>Gender:</b>				
<b>Male</b>	48.1%	44.0%	1.09	50.0%
<b>Female</b>	51.9%	56.0%	0.93	50.0%

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

And, in our summary, where reported percentages do not otherwise total 100%, small numbers of those who are undecided or refused to answer may be omitted.