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Summary of Tennesseans' opinions on state issues Spring 2009

Tennesseans deadlock over Legislature control as approval tanks. A three-way, highly partisan deadlock emerges when Tennesseans are asked which party should control the state Legislature. Meanwhile, Tennesseans' approval of the Legislature has declined to levels not seen since the Tennessee Waltz scandal of 2005. *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187).*

Education tops Tennesseans' state spending priorities. Majorities of Tennesseans say the state is spending too little on education at all levels. Fifty-one percent say Tennessee is spending too little on state universities; 54%, on community colleges and technical schools; and 62%, on elementary and secondary education. *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187).*

Groceries and wine sound fine, hefty majority says. Grocery stores should be allowed to sell wine if they are located in places that already allow alcoholic beverage sales, nearly two-thirds of Tennesseans say. Sixty-two percent say grocery stores should be allowed to sell wine, while just over a quarter (26%) disagree, and 12% don't know. *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187).*

To introduce or ban a state income tax? It's a toss-up, and how you ask matters. Tennesseans divide almost evenly on whether the state should introduce or constitutionally ban a state income tax. With 14% undecided, neither option attracts a majority, and whichever option is mentioned last tends to gain support. *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187).*

Gov. Bredesen's approval rating falls to slim majority. Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval rating has slipped to 52%, down from 58% in the fall and well below his tenure's high of 72% in Spring 2004. *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187).*

Perception of state barometer higher than national. Tennessee's barometer of satisfaction with current conditions stands at 43, considerably better than the score of 28 state residents give the nation. But last fall it was 54 and 60 a year ago. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Economy state's No. 1 problem. A majority of Tennesseans (51%) name the economy as the No. 1 state problem, lower than the 66% who name it the premier national problem. More women than men name the economy as the top state problem. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Most say abortion should be legal in certain circumstances. As competing bills to amend the state constitution work their way through committee at the state assembly, 52% of Tennesseans say that abortion should be legal in some circumstances, but not others. *(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)*

Details of Findings

MTSU Poll State Report, Spring 2009

Tennesseans deadlock over Legislature control as approval tanks *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

A three-way, highly partisan deadlock emerges when Tennesseans are asked which party they would like to see control the state Legislature. Meanwhile, Tennesseans' approval of the Legislature has declined to levels not seen since the Tennessee Waltz scandal of 2005.

About a third (37%) would like to see Democrats in charge, but another third (33%) would like to see Republicans running things, and just over a quarter (30%) don't know who they'd like to see in charge.

Not surprisingly, about eight in 10 Republicans want the Legislature's control in Republican hands, and about eight in 10 Democrats want it in Democratic hands. About half of independents say they don't know, and the other half split evenly between Democrats and Republicans. Among these independents, education makes the most difference, with better educated independents more likely to favor Republican control and lesser educated independents gravitating toward not knowing.

In November's election, Republicans captured control of both state legislative chambers for the first time since Reconstruction. But in February, the party revoked the membership of House Speaker Kent Williams, who, in a deal with Democrats, had beaten out the party's preferred candidate for the post, Rep. Jason Mumpower. The move left the House populated by 49 Republicans, 49 Democrats, and Williams.

Meanwhile, the proportion of Tennesseans who approve of the state Legislature's job performance has slid from 39% in the fall to 34%. The last time the Legislature's approval rating sank this low was in fall 2005 and spring 2006, when Tennesseans were absorbing news of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's "Operation Tennessee Waltz" sting that led to the arrests of several legislators on bribery charges. The only other recent level this low appeared in spring 2003, as the state was grappling with a recession. Thus the current recession and turmoil over control of the House may have contributed to the present low. The best predictor of disapproval is frequent newspaper reading.

Education tops Tennesseans' state spending priorities *(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Majorities of Tennesseans say the state is spending too little on education at all levels. Fifty-one% say Tennessee is spending too little on state universities; 54%, on community colleges and technical schools; and 62%, on elementary and secondary education.

Meanwhile, near majorities say the state is spending too little on the environment (49%), programs for the mentally retarded (47%), and the handicapped (also 47%). Slightly fewer, 44%, say mental health, mass transit, and foster care each need more spending. Spending priorities at the bottom of the list include law enforcement agencies (40%), TennCare (38%), highway maintenance (35%), Welfare (26%), and highway construction (25%).

Support for elementary and secondary education spending is highest among Tennesseans age 25 to 60, 70% of whom think the state spends too little. Political party is the best predictor of support for more spending on community colleges and technical schools, with well over half (61%) of Democrats and independents saying the state spends too little compared to 38% of Republicans. Spending on higher education finds more support among Tennesseans earning over \$25,000 a year than among those earning less, with wealthier females voicing more support than wealthier males. Among poorer Tennesseans, Democrats who use the Internet frequently express the most support.

These spending priorities roughly parallel those found in the February 2003 MTSU Poll, which coincided with the state's last budget crunch. The proportion of Tennesseans saying that the state spends too little on elementary and secondary education has declined 10 percentage points since 2003. But, as was the case then, elementary and secondary education spending is Tennesseans' top priority. Support for more spending on community colleges has climbed five percentage points since 2003, and support for spending on universities, two percentage points. Among the priorities toward the bottom of the list, support for mass transit spending grew by six points, as did support for highway construction spending, and support for spending on highway maintenance grew by seven points.

The spending categories about which poll respondents were asked reflect the major categories of Tennessee's state budget. Categories were presented to each respondent in a randomized order to minimize question order effects.

Groceries and wine sound fine, ample majority says

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Grocery stores should be allowed to sell wine if they are located in places that already allow the sale of alcoholic beverages, nearly two-thirds of Tennesseans say.

Sixty-two percent of state residents say grocery stores should be allowed to sell wine, while just over a quarter (26%) disagree, and 12% don't know.

Attitudes toward grocery store wine sales interact most strongly with religious identity. Tennesseans who strongly identify with conservative evangelical Christian beliefs and practices express the lowest support (42%), while those who identify least with evangelicalism express the most support (73%). The finding probably reflects conservative evangelicals' taboo against consuming alcohol.

To introduce or ban a state income tax? It's a toss-up, and how you ask matters

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Tennesseans divide almost evenly on whether the state should introduce or constitutionally ban a state income tax. When asked to choose between the two statements: "Tennessee should amend its constitution to forbid the state from ever introducing a tax on personal income" and "Tennessee should introduce a tax on personal income to lower sales taxes and eliminate taxes on groceries," 46% of Tennesseans support constitutionally banning a state income tax, and 40% support introducing a state income tax with cuts in sales and food taxes. The difference is too small to reasonably rule out a statistical tie, and a sizable 14% are undecided.

Interestingly, the order in which the two options are presented makes a significant difference in how respondents answer. Specifically, support tends to rise for whichever statement is read

last. For example, when the statement about banning an income tax is read last, 50% of respondents support it compared to 35% who support introducing an income tax and 16% who are undecided. In that case, the margin is large enough to rule out a statistical tie between banning and introducing an income tax. But when the statement about introducing an income tax with cuts in sales and food taxes is read last, support for banning an income tax drops to 43%, support for introducing an income tax rises to 46%, and the undecideds decline to 11%. In that condition, the difference is again not large enough to rule out a statistical tie.

The presence of this question order effect probably means that attitudes toward the options of banning or introducing an income tax are fluid and neither carefully considered nor firmly held, an interpretation bolstered by the appreciable number of undecideds.

[Previous MTSU Polls](#) have found that opposition to a state income tax drops markedly with the mention of corresponding cuts in sales and food taxes and other trade-offs.

Wealthier Tennesseans favor an income tax ban, while poorer Tennesseans, especially those who are Democrats or independents, tend toward supporting an income tax with sales tax cuts and also toward the “Don’t know” category.

Gov. Bredesen’s approval rating falls to slim majority
(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Gov. Phil Bredesen’s approval rating has slipped to 52%, down from 58% in the fall and well below his tenure’s high of 72% in Spring 2004.

Among demographic factors, education makes the biggest difference, with under half (45%) of Tennesseans without a college degree expressing approval of Bredesen compared with nearly two-thirds (64%) of those with a college degree. His strongest supporters are older, college-educated Tennesseans. His support is unaffected by attitudes toward the state’s economy, but over two-thirds (67%) of those who approve of the Legislature also approve of Bredesen. By contrast, Bredesen’s approval stands at just 45% among those who disapprove of the Legislature. It appears, then, that Bredesen’s approval rating may be linked to approval of the Legislature, although a causal relationship, and its direction, are difficult to prove.

As in earlier MTSU Polls, the governor, a Democrat, maintains roughly equal levels of popularity among the state’s Democrats, independents, and Republicans.

State barometer considerably higher than national barometer
(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)

Tennessee’s barometer stands at 43, considerably better than the score of 28 state residents give the nation. The Tennessee barometer is a 100-point scale based on approval of the governor, perceptions of the current condition of the state’s economy, and satisfaction with the future direction of the state.

Last fall’s barometer was dramatically higher at 54, but down from 60 in fall 2006.

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

Looking at components of the state barometer, a near majority (48%) are satisfied with the way things are now going in Tennessee, a satisfaction which stretches across all demographic groups. The only predictor of satisfaction with the state economy is evangelicalism, with only 10% of more evangelical Tennesseans rating the economy excellent or good, compared to 22% of the less evangelical.

Phil Bredesen's approval as governor remains a high 52%, down from 58% in the fall and from an all-time high of 72% in spring 2004.

Economy also state's No. 1 problem

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-477-8389)

A majority of Tennesseans (51%) name the economy as the No. 1 state problem, a figure lower than the 66% who name the economy as the premier national problem.

Gender is the best predictor for naming the economy as the state's top problem. Fully 54% of females name the economy first, but only 48% of males agree.

Disregarding gender, political orientation is the best predictor, with 55% liberals and middle-of-the-roaders naming the economy – compared to 46% of conservatives.

Most Tennesseans say abortion should be legal in certain circumstances

(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)

A majority of Tennesseans (52%) say abortion "should be legal under some circumstances, but not others." Smaller percentages say either that abortion should be illegal under all circumstances (25%) or legal under all circumstances (19%).

Two similar, proposed amendments to the state constitution are now in committee, each giving the Legislature power to pass anti-abortion legislation should *Roe v. Wade* be overturned. The results show that Most Tennesseans, like most Americans, believe abortion should be legal under some circumstances but not others. Previous polling under different circumstances has consistently shown that most people don't think a girl, under 18 years of age, who was raped, or was a victim of incest, or who is likely to be seriously injured or to die as a result of pregnancy or delivery should be barred from terminating such a pregnancy. Most Americans also tend to find abortion more acceptable the earlier it is in a pregnancy's term. On the other hand, most Americans also believe that a healthy woman over 18 years of age, who engaged in consensual sex without contraception should not be allowed to have an abortion in the pregnancy's third trimester.

The current bills do allow certain exceptions to a ban on abortion but limit the procedure more than the current national law – following *Roe v. Wade* – allows.

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:

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	29.8%	15.1%	1.98	29.8%
35-49	28.7%	23.8%	1.21	28.8%
50-64	24.5%	34.9%	0.70	24.4%
65+	16.9%	26.2%	0.65	17.0%
Race:				
White	82.1%	88.0%	0.93	84.7%
Black	15.5%	7.6%	1.00	10.4%
Other	2.4%	4.5%	1.00	4.9%
Gender:				
Male	48.1%	44.0%	1.09	50.0%
Female	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.