

Robert Wyatt, Director, (615) 898-2335

Ken Blake, Operations Manager, (615) 898-2226

Jill Edy, Planning Manager, (615) 904-8552

Teresa Mastin, Public Affairs Manager, (615) 904-8239

E-mail: rwyant@mtsu.edu

kblake@mtsu.edu

jedy@mtsu.edu

tmastin@mtsu.edu

Summary of Major Findings, October 1999

Sundquist ratings high despite tax reform. Fully 55 percent approve of the job Gov. Don Sundquist is doing, down from 65 percent in March 1999. Approval of the Democratic legislative leadership has dropped more sharply, from 56 percent in March to 43 percent now.

Sales tax increase, income tax opposition strong. A full 62 percent oppose the income tax. But opposition to raising the sales tax is far stronger: 81 percent oppose. Support for a lottery is strong (70 percent), but few believe it would solve the state's financial problems.

Beliefs erroneous about state spending. The public underestimates the amount the state spends on education, guessing 17 percent, when actual spending is 44 percent. Respondents estimate that 27 percent goes to "general expenses," when the figure is 2 percent – suggesting that they believe the state is wasteful. Fewer than half think the state faces a real financial crisis.

Big business not paying fair share. A large majority (67 percent) believes big business is not paying its fair tax share. Though 40 percent believe small businesses pay fairly, a majority support taxing those paying little or nothing. About 44 percent believe individuals pay too much.

Support strong for death penalty. A large majority (71 percent) supports the death penalty for murder. But only 39 percent would support death without biological evidence such as DNA testing. General support is higher outside Metro (76 percent) than in Metro (61 percent). These findings are especially important, given pending executions in Tennessee.

Few saving enough for retirement. Almost half of Middle Tennesseans are saving less than 10 percent of their annual income for retirement. But 75 percent doubt that Social Security will be available when they retire. Most Middle Tennesseans talk little about retirement finances.

Tolerance high for atheists and homosexuals, lower for racists. Middle Tennesseans are about as tolerant of people who hold antireligious positions as other Americans. Nearly three-fourths (72 percent) would permit the antireligious to make public speeches. Residents are even more tolerant of homosexuals (75 percent). A majority (58 percent) would allow racists to speak.

Education No. 1 problem, highest priority. Education is still the state's greatest problem, named by 21 percent in an open-ended question. Education also receives highest priority for increased state spending. Majorities support increases for elementary/secondary education (69 percent), higher education (50 percent), and mental retardation (52 percent).

Other findings. General confidence in military, medicine, and science is high. News media confidence is low, but local media are judged reasonably credible. Satisfaction with personal finances is high; half say they are better off now than last year. Al Gore wins 54 to 25 percent

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/2

against former Sen. Bill Bradley in a hypothetical race for the Democratic nomination. But some Republicans back Bradley in the primary to weaken Gore.

Details on Major Findings

Sundquist's ratings high despite push for tax reform

Gov. Don Sundquist continues to enjoy high ratings despite his push for tax reform and state budget increases. Fully 55 percent of Middle Tennesseans approve of the job he is doing as governor. This represents a drop from his 65 percent approval rating in the March 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll – just after a landslide reelection. The rating is much closer to the 63 percent approval Sundquist received in the fall 1998 poll.

Support for the governor is even across political, racial, educational, and economic groups, indicating that he is doing better among minorities and liberals than in the past.

The Democratic leadership of the state legislature, by contrast, received a 43 percent approval rating, down from a majority 56 percent in March. Here, approval by Republicans (22 percent) and Independents (40 percent) is significantly lower than approval by Democrats (63 percent).

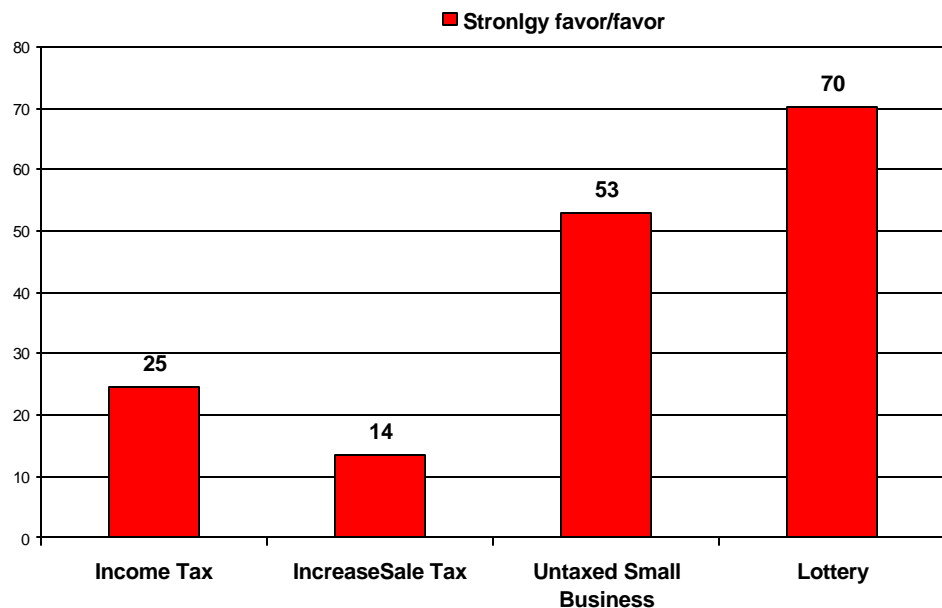
President Bill Clinton scored a 52 percent approval rating, a drop from 60 percent in March. Former Metro Mayor Phil Bredesen outscores all other politicians measured, with a 61 percent positive rating. Ratings of politicians were asked before other issues to avoid biasing responses.

Sales tax increase, income tax opposition strong

There is strong opposition to an income tax but even less public support for raising the sales tax. Sixty-two percent of respondents oppose or strongly oppose the income tax, while only 25 percent favor it. However, 81 percent oppose or strongly oppose raising the sales tax. Opposition to both proposals is broad-based. Men and women, liberals and conservatives, rich and poor oppose either tax.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents continued to oppose the income tax even if the state could only increase the rate by constitutional amendment. Further, only 18 percent favored the income tax under this condition – even fewer than the number that favored it when no guarantees were presented.

Support for New Revenue Sources



Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/4

Nevertheless, reducing the sales tax was the compromise that respondents found most palatable: 40 percent would favor or strongly favor an income tax under this condition. Women found this proposal more attractive than men, though even among women, support for a personal income tax did not reach a majority. Forty-seven percent of women favored the income tax if it meant eliminating the sales tax on groceries and lowering the sales tax.

The most popular revenue-raiser was a state lottery, favored by 70 percent of our respondents. However, of those citizens who believe that Tennessee is facing a financial crisis, only 6 percent believe that a lottery alone would solve the state's problems; 38 percent believe it would help a lot. Only 16 percent believe it would be no help at all.

Although a majority favors the lottery, there are deep divisions among the public. People who are both strongly religious and politically conservative oppose establishing a lottery. Fifty-five percent of conservatives who attend church weekly oppose the lottery, while 86 percent of those who attend church only occasionally support the lottery.

We also found majority support (53 percent) for extending taxes on profits and assets to small businesses that are not currently required to pay these kinds of taxes. Unsurprisingly, this proposal was more strongly favored by liberals and middle-of-the-roaders (57 percent total) than by conservatives (45 percent).

Forms of taxation that impact consumers most directly and over which they have the least control are those they dislike the most. Indirect taxes, such as those on businesses, and forms of revenue that involve consumer choice, such as the lottery, get more public support.

When we asked citizens what the mix of state revenue sources should look like, they preferred business taxes and a lottery as the major revenue producers. Here are the desirable percentages from each source:

- Lottery 31%
- Business taxes 26
- Sales taxes 21
- Income taxes 13
- Grocery taxes 9

Twenty-seven percent of our respondents say they paid a great deal of attention to the personal income tax debate, and another 28 percent say they paid some attention.

Beliefs erroneous about state spending

The public has two big misconceptions about state spending – widely underestimating spending on education and overestimating spending on the amorphous (and potentially wasteful) “general government expenses.”

Here is what Middle Tennesseans believe the state spends for leading services and actual spending, expressed in percentages:

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/5

	<u>Beliefs</u>	<u>Actual Spending</u>
• Education	17%	44%
• Health and Social Services	17	23
• Law Enforcement	17	9
• Roads and Transportation	17	10
• General Government Expenses	27	2

Citizens are more or less evenly divided on whether or not Tennessee faces a financial crisis. Forty-six percent say we are; 43 percent say we are not.

Big business not paying fair tax share

A large majority (67 percent) believed that big businesses are not carrying their share of the tax load. In contrast, 40 percent believe that small businesses are paying about their fair share, and only 20 percent believe small businesses were paying less than they should – although 53 percent support taxing assets and profits of small businesses that are not currently required to pay such taxes.

Opinion is divided about whether individuals are paying their fair share: 44 percent believe they are paying more than their share, while 42 percent still believe individual pay something close to their fair share. Only 9 percent believed that individuals do not pay enough.

Support strong for death penalty, but with some reservations

With the impending executions of Robert Glenn Coe and Phillip Ray Workman, attitudes toward capital punishment in this state take on new importance.

Nearly three-fourths (71 percent) of Middle Tennesseans support the death penalty for persons convicted of murder, while about one-fourth (24 percent) are opposed. These figures are virtually identical with results of a February 1999 Gallup survey of all Americans. Thus, area residents – despite some stereotypes – neither favor nor oppose the death penalty more than other citizens.

Given certain qualifications, support for the death penalty drops. For example, more than one-third (36 percent) would support execution only for murders that involve mutilation of children and other extreme acts – leaving a bare majority (50 percent) supporting the death penalty for other crimes.

Likewise, a plurality (42 percent) would support the death penalty only when there is biological or chemical evidence – such as DNA testing – establishing guilt. This leaves about an equal number (39 percent) supportive of death without such evidence – but an important minority (20 percent) remains undecided on this issue.

About half of the sample (49 percent each) becomes more likely to oppose capital punishment under conditions where mentally ill or innocent people might die. If they were convinced that the poor were more likely to die, a similar 44 percent would be more likely to oppose.

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/6

If they were convinced that minorities were more likely to die, 37 percent would be more likely to oppose capital punishment. Opposition increases by about the same amount if teens might die (37 percent).

The fact that life imprisonment costs less than executing murderers would sway about one-third (33 percent) against the death penalty. If life sentences without parole were assured, just under one-third (30 percent) would more likely oppose.

Asked about the death penalty for crimes other than murder, a figure nearing one-in-five (16 percent) support the death penalty for DUI offenders. About 13 percent feel likewise about executing armed robbers, but only six percent would execute those committing white-collar crimes.

Support for capital punishment for murder is higher outside (76 percent) than inside Nashville-Davidson County (61 percent); other factors such as race, education, or economic level do not prove to be significant for overall support.

Nearly three-fourths (74 percent) support death for convicted fast-food murderer Paul Dennis Reid. This increase from the 71 percent who supported capital punishment in the abstract question indicates that specific conditions – and particularly heinous ones – make a difference in survey responses.

Few saving enough for retirement

A majority of Middle Tennesseans lack basic retirement planning knowledge. When presented with five retirement-related questions, more than 60 percent gave two or less correct answers. For example, when asked if an important rule of retirement planning was to stick with the most conservative types of assets (e.g., bonds or certificates of deposit), 37 percent responded with an incorrect answer of yes, and 21 percent said they didn't know the correct answer.

Though most Middle Tennesseans believe Social Security funds will not be available when they retire, fewer than 20 percent are saving one-tenth or more of their annual income toward a financially secure retirement.

Moreover, Middle Tennesseans aren't spending a lot of time talking about retirement planning. On average, more than 50 percent of those surveyed said they hardly ever talk about retirement planning. And when they do (i.e., a few times a year), they most often talk with friends and family, individuals who are likely to be no more knowledgeable about the topic than they are.

Age was the best predictor of retirement planning knowledge. Individuals either approaching retirement or recently retired (i.e., 35-49 and 50-64 age groups) were most knowledgeable about retirement planning. No differences in retirement planning knowledge surfaced as a function of gender, race, education, or income.

Tolerance high for atheists, homosexuals, lower for racists

Despite strong religious traditions and stereotypes of narrow-mindedness, Middle Tennesseans are about as tolerant as the rest of the nation of people who hold antireligious positions. Indeed, a full 72 percent would allow an antireligious person to make a speech (compared with 74 percent in a 1994 nationwide survey).

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/7

Fully 58 percent would also allow antireligious people to teach in a college or university, and 65 percent would support leaving antireligious books in a public library. Interestingly, church attendance or denominational affiliation is not a significant predictor of tolerance of atheists.

Area residents are more tolerant of homosexuals on most issues than of atheists. Fully 75 percent would allow homosexuals to make public speeches and 71 percent would allow them to teach in colleges, and 61 percent would support leaving a book favoring homosexuality in a public library. In general, residents of Metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County or the eight-county Metropolitan Statistical Area are more tolerant of homosexuals than those living elsewhere. For example, 91 percent in Metro would allow a homosexual to make a speech, compared with 69 percent in the remaining counties.

Concerning homosexuality, national samples of Americans measured by the General Social Survey in 1994 are somewhat more tolerant, with 82 percent, for example, in favor of allowing a homosexual to speak.

Of the three tolerance issues examined, Middle Tennesseans prove least tolerant of racists, though majorities will still allow racists to express themselves under some conditions. In terms of making a speech, 58 percent take the tolerant position. And just about half are willing to allow a racist to teach in a college. Nearly two-thirds (61 percent) would still retain a racist book in a public library.

Of course, measuring tolerance of racism – and other controversial issues – may confound two conflicting values: tolerance by those who disagree with racists but would still grant them rights, and acceptance of racist values by those who are racists.

Education still No. 1 problem, highest spending priority

Education is still the state's greatest problem, named by 21 percent of respondents in an open-ended question – a figure identical to last fall's Middle Tennessee Poll. High crime was cited by 12 percent, again similar to the results last year.

This year, high taxes were cited as the No. 1 problem by 10 percent of respondents – despite the prominence of the issue in the media and political agenda. Last fall, the percentage citing taxes was only 4 percent.

If levels of citizen support for increased spending are interpreted as a list of priorities, our survey indicates that citizens' budget priorities are:

- Elementary and secondary education: a large majority (69 percent) believes we are not spending enough.
- Programs for the mentally retarded: a majority (52 percent) believes we do not spend enough.
- Higher education: a majority (50 percent) thinks we are not spending enough.
- Mental health programs: a plurality (47 percent) believes we do not spend enough.
- Programs for the handicapped: a plurality (46 percent) believes we do not spend enough.
- Environmental programs: a plurality (44 percent) believes we are not spending enough.
- Law enforcement: a plurality (43 percent) believes we are not spending enough.
- Foster care: a plurality (40 percent) believes we do not spend enough.
- Mass transit: a plurality (39 percent) believes we do not spend enough.

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/8

- TennCare: a plurality (35 percent) thinks we are not spending enough.
- Highway maintenance: a plurality (41 percent) believes we are spending the right amount.
- Welfare: a plurality (39 percent) thinks we are spending too much.

In a climate of rising revenue, this list could be read as an ordering of citizens' preferences about where the money should go first. In a fiscal crunch, the spending areas on the lower half of the list, along with welfare and highway spending, may be places where citizens are most willing to sacrifice.

Although only 43 percent of our respondents said they believed Tennessee is facing a financial crisis and there is support for increased spending in most policy areas, that support is weaker in than it was in March. In seven of the 10 spending areas where we asked comparable questions, support for spending was lower in September than last spring – though many differences did not reach statistical significance. Only elementary and secondary education received support for increases. Support for more spending on law enforcement and mental health programs remained essentially unchanged.

While a plurality of our respondents favored more spending in most policy areas, when asked whether they would prefer to raise taxes or cut programs if they had to choose one in order to balance the budget, most (41 percent) chose to cut programs. Thirty-three percent opted to raise taxes.

Confidence in military, medicine, Supreme Court high but media low

Area residents display very high confidence in the leadership of the military. Nearly a majority (45 percent) reports a great deal of confidence, a figure that compares to 38 percent in a 1994 national sample of all Americans. Confidence in the military is particularly high outside of Nashville-Davidson County, where 53 percent report a great deal of confidence. Within Metro, the figure is 29 percent.

Respondents reported a similar level of confidence in medicine (46 percent a great deal). Science was highly regarded (39 percent), as was organized religion (32 percent), the Supreme Court (33 percent), and education (31 percent).

For organized religion, there were significant differences between those who attend church weekly (46 percent high confidence) and those who attend less or not at all (19 percent). Nationwide, only 26 percent expressed high confidence in organized religion.

Low levels of confidence were expressed in the executive branch of the U.S. government, with about one-third (34 percent) reporting little confidence. Other institutions receiving low confidence ratings were organized labor, (32 percent hardly), the press (28 percent), television (28 percent), and the U.S. Congress (23 percent).

Press confidence – which is similar to national figures – was significantly lower among conservatives (42 percent hardly any) than among middle-of-the-roaders and liberals (19 percent).

Local news media gain adequate credibility ratings

Given the low confidence expressed in leadership of the press and television, Middle Tennesseans' credibility ratings of their own news media remain fairly high (a finding similar to ratings of, say, the local U.S. Representative v. Congress in general).

More than half (51 percent) report that the newspaper they read most often is fair in reporting. Less 15 percent, however, finds their favorite newspaper unbiased, though more than one-third (36 percent) gives a middle rating between biased and unbiased. A little more than one-third (34 percent) says the newspaper tells the whole story. Something less than one-half (42 percent) finds the paper accurate and a similar figure finds it trustworthy.

The favorite local television news program receives even higher ratings than the newspaper, with more than half (56 percent) rating TV news reporting fair, though again only about one-third (35 percent) finds the program unbiased. Still, 38 percent believe that TV news tells the whole story, and more than half believe it is accurate (52 percent) and trustworthy (50 percent).

When asked about the news media in general, however, ratings are lower – paralleling the general findings for confidence in the leadership of the press and television. Less than a third (28 percent) find the news media in general to be fair, and only 27 percent believe they tell the whole story. About 17 percent find them unbiased; 36 percent find them accurate; and 34 percent find them trustworthy.

Most residents happy with finances, optimistic for future

Satisfaction with personal finances continues to be high, with 37 percent of Middle Tennesseans reporting that they are “pretty well satisfied” with their income and 43 percent responding that they are “more or less” satisfied. Figures did not differ significantly from last fall's findings.

Satisfaction, of course, was higher for those earning \$40,000 and above (49 percent “pretty well”), as opposed to those earning less (29 percent).

Fully one-half of respondents reported that they are better off this year than last year – but there were significant differences for those 65 and older, where only one-fourth reported being better off.

A figure nearing a majority (43 percent) expects to be even better off next year. But again there are age differences, with only 17 percent of those over 65 giving the optimistic answer, compared with 63 percent in the 18-34 age group and 40 percent those 35-64.

It's Gore for President, but some Republicans cast crafty primary votes

Favorite son Al Gore wins hands down 54 to 25 percent against former Sen. Bill Bradley in a hypothetical race for the Democratic nomination for president. But there are wide differences here across party boundaries. While 81 percent of Democrats back Gore, only 49 percent of Independents and 27 percent of Republicans follow suit – meaning that most Republicans favored Bradley.

In a hypothetical Presidential race among those who expressed a primary preference for Gore, Gore pulls 65 percent of the vote against likely Republican nominee George W. Bush's 29 percent – with Gore receiving 94 percent of the Democratic vote to Bush's 81 percent of

Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/10

Republicans. Among Independents, Gore beats Bush 56 to 30 percent. These figures give some clue to Gore's strength as a native son and his ability to draw at least some Republican votes.

Among those who expressed a primary preference for Bradley over Gore, however, Bush, wins handily in a Presidential match-up, getting 65 percent of the vote to Bradley's 27 percent. Thus, among those who expressed a primary preference for Bradley, Bush wins by 65 percent to Bradley's 27 percent. This indicates that some Bradley votes in the primary were intended to weaken Gore.

These cross-party figures take on significance in Tennessee primaries because there is no party registration and voters are free to vote in any primary. At least in a hypothetical match, these results indicate that some of the pro-Republican vote is cast strategically to weaken the perceived Democratic leader. Doubtless we would have found a similar result among Democrats if the table were reversed.

Sample and Method

The poll was conducted by telephone from Sept. 13 to Oct. 1, 1999, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 481 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the 39 counties making up Middle Tennessee. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4.5 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 sample within 4.5 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. In most cases, the margin of error is actually smaller. 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 estimates for age, race, and gender obtained from 1998 U.S. Census Bureau figures for Middle Tennessee. This is because certain demographic groups are difficult to contact. Our data were thus weighted to more closely match Census estimates, yielding a total of 484 cases for statistical purposes. Here are relevant percentages:

Demographic	Population	Sample	Weight	Result
Age 18-34	30.49%	34.50%	0.88	30.30%
Age 35-49	32.88	30.40	1.08	33.20
Age 50-64	20.86	20.30	1.03	20.60
Age 65 up	15.77	14.80	1.07	16.00
Male	47.66	53.20	0.90	47.30
Female	52.34	46.80	1.12	52.70
White	87.23	87.40	1.00	87.10
Black	11.48	7.80	1.47	11.30
Other	1.30%	4.40	0.29	1.20

The Middle Tennessee Poll, begun in 1998, is a twice-a-year assessment of attitudes in Middle Tennessee regarding free expression, faith in major institutions, and current political issues. MTSU's College of Mass Communication, School of Journalism, and John Seigenthaler Chair of First Amendment Studies provide funding. The university's Office of Communication Research sponsors and administers the poll.