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## Summary of Social Findings, Fall 2003

**“Family” defined flexibly in Tennessee.** For most Tennesseans (69%), people can be considered family even if they are not related by blood or marriage. Fully 57% say people who love one another are a family, but just 39% say people of the same sex can be a family.

**Attitudes toward Gay marriage, clergy political than religious.** Only 23% approved of gay marriage rights, but politics rather than religion is the major predictor. A majority (53%) of liberals approve, a figure that drops to 26% for those in the middle and 7% on the right.

**Support high, broad for gay civil rights.** Support for gay job and housing rights is strong across all religious and political groups. Fully 80% of our sample approves of equal job rights for gays and 81% approves of equal housing rights.

**Obesity a major problem; fast food industry not responsible.** A large majority (79%) consider obesity a major national problem, but only 41% hold the fast-food industry responsible.

**Half say their weight about right, but BMI indicates otherwise.** A majority (52%) said their own weight was about right, while 38% admitted to being somewhat overweight and 3% very overweight. But when we calculated their Body Mass Index, just 42% scored “normal.”

**Make health insurance cheaper, more universal, Tennesseans say.** A strong majority (64%) of state residents favor a plan similar to Medicare that would cover all Americans.

**Legalize Canadian drugs.** A full 62% of Tennesseans think that it should be legal for Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada.

**Education remains top state problem.** Education remained the state’s top problem, but the poor state of the economy moved ahead of government inefficiency and taxes.

**Spending for schools a high priority.** Nearly three-fourths (71%) feel that the state is spending too little on elementary and secondary education. Forty-six percent think too little is spent on community colleges schools, while 45% believe too little is spent on universities.

**Private universities, schools outrate public.** Fully 43% think private colleges are better than public colleges. Nearly two-thirds (62%) feel private primary and secondary schools are better.

**Both Rush, Chicks erred in speaking their minds.** Most Tennesseans (54%) feel commentator Rush Limbaugh was wrong to say that a black quarterback is overrated and that the sports media want to see black quarterbacks succeed. And 55% feel Dixie Chick singer Natalie Maines was wrong to say that she was ashamed that George Bush was from Texas.

## Detail of Social Findings, Fall 2003

### **“Family” defined flexibly by most Tennesseans**

For a large majority of Tennesseans (69%), people can be considered family, even if they are not related by blood or marriage. The sex of the respondent makes a big difference here: 77% of females agree that blood or marriage ties are not necessary to be family, while 58% of males concur.

On subsequent questions, those who answered “no” to this general question were not asked more specific follow-up questions but were scored as negative votes.

A substantial majority (57%) say that people who love one another are a family, regardless of blood or marital ties. Here, age made a significant difference, with those nearly two-thirds (64%) of those 18-49 answering affirmatively, compare to less than a majority (47%) of those 50 and older.

When asked about people living together and sharing expenses, a majority (50%) again consider them a family. But politics plays a major role here, with 56% of those identifying themselves as middle-of-the-road or liberal agreeing, compared with only 35% of conservatives and those at the political extremes.

Fully 60% of respondents consider a family to be people who have a lifelong commitment to care for each other. Age again plays a role, with 72% of those 18-34 agreeing, compared to 60% of those from 35-64 and just 38% of those 65 and older.

Asked whether people who raise children together are a family, 58% said yes. Here, politics again plays a role: 70% of liberals and 64% of middle-of-the-roads and far left agree, compared to just 43% of conservatives.

Fully 58% agreed that people who just consider themselves to be family are a family. But again political orientation is important. Not quite a majority of conservatives (48%) agree, compared to 65% of those in the middle and on the far left and 78% of liberals.

Asked about whether people of the same gender who consider themselves family are a family, only 39% said yes. Just above one-fifth of conservatives (22%) agreed, compared to 68% of liberals and 45% of those in the middle and at each extreme of the political spectrum.

Note that these questions stated nothing about sexual relations among the people involved.

### **Attitudes toward Gay marriage, gay clergy more about politics than religion**

Attitudes toward gay marriage rights and gay clergy are determined more by political orientation and party than by religious affiliation or frequency of attendance at services. But there is broad support for gay employment and housing rights regardless of political or religious orientation.

Although only 23% of our sample approved of gay marriage rights – down from 29% in spring 2003 – there were marked differences by political orientation. A majority (53%) of those on the left approve of gay marriage, a figure that drops to 26% for middle-of-the-roads and to 7% among those on the right.

Political party was also an important predictor of attitudes toward gay marriage, with 88% of Republicans opposed, compared with 57% of both Democrats and independents.

A plurality (42%) of our sample identify themselves as middle-of-the-road, while 37% consider themselves conservative, and only 14% choose liberal. The sample is more evenly split by party identification – with 33% choosing Republican, 30% Democrat, and 31% independent or other parties.

Political orientation again dominates over religion regarding whether gays should serve as clergy. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of our sample opposes gay clergy. But fully 81% on the right say no, compared to 59% among middle-of-the-roaders and 35% among those on the left.

A large majority (71%) said they felt the Episcopal Church violated Christian teaching when it approved a gay man to serve as bishop. An overwhelming 85% of conservatives agreed, as opposed to 68% of those in the middle, and a bare majority (52%) among liberals.

Political orientation is also the best predictor of whether respondents felt that women should serve as clergy. Though a large majority (62%) favor female clergy, three-quarters (76%) of those in the middle and on the left agree, compare with less than a majority (43%) of conservatives. Some scholars argue that a stronger biblical case can be made against female clergy than gay clergy.

The fact that our sample is spread across so many denominations may diminish the role of religious identification regarding the gay issue. But even attendance at religious services did not emerge as a major predictor here, as it has in past surveys.

### **Support high and broad for gay civil rights**

In contrast to gays and religion, support for gay job and housing rights is strong across all religious and political groups. Fully 80% of our sample approves of equal job rights for gays. The fact that there are no significant differences here according to political orientation, party, or religious affiliation indicates that support is broad based.

Fully 81% also support equal housing rights for gays. Here, 85% of women are supportive compared to 76% of men. Support levels are virtually unchanged from our spring 2003 survey.

Given a list of groups that respondents might feel threatened the social or political order, only 10% picked homosexuals, while 21% chose immigrants without visas and 19% chose criminals. Another 15% chose Islamic fundamentalists. There are no major changes here from our spring 2003 survey.

Political orientation did play a role regarding threatening groups. For those in the middle, 27% opted for criminals, while 22% on the right chose visa-less immigrants, and 26% on the left selected right-wing extremists.

### **Obesity seen as major problem; fast food industry not responsible**

Nearly 8 in 10 Tennesseans (79%) consider obesity to be a major national problem, but only 41% hold the fast-food industry responsible. Still, a majority (53%) oppose vending machines in elementary and high schools.

Adult Tennesseans who report that they are registered to vote are far more likely to regard obesity as a major problem (83%) than those who say they are not registered (56%). And females (85%) are more likely than males (72%) to report that it is a major problem.

Attitudes toward the fast food industry as split by race, with 43% of whites and other races saying the fast food industry is very or somewhat responsible compared to 28% of blacks.

Age was a major predictor of opposition to school vending machines, with 75% of those 65 and older in opposition, compared to 61% of those 35-64, and only 26% of those 18-34. Clearly being accustomed to vending machines in schools – they were not generally available when older Tennesseans were school-age – is an important matter.

Asked whether there should be a special tax on snack foods, Tennesseans turn thumbs down by a hefty majority (78%).

### **Half say their weight about right, but Body Mass Index indicates otherwise**

Fully 52% of our sample said that their own weight was about right, while another 38% admitted to being somewhat overweight. Only 3% said they were very overweight, while 5% chose underweight and 1% chose very underweight.

At the end of the interview, we asked respondents their approximate weight and height, knowing that people tend to under-report weight and over-report height. We then used these figures to calculate the Body Mass Index for our respondents.

Nearly one-fifth of respondents (18%) fell into the obese category as defined by the National Institutes of Health, while more than a quarter (28%) qualified as overweight. Just 42% were classified as normal weight and 13% as underweight.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 23% of Tennesseans were obese in 2001, within range of the margin of error for our poll, even given the fact that CDC data may be more accurate.

More females than males scored as normal weight (45%, 38%) by NIH measures. And more females than males were also underweight (17%, 6%). By contrast, more males than females were overweight (35%, 22%) and obese (21%, 16%).

### **Make health insurance cheaper, more universal, Tennesseans say**

A strong majority (64%) of state residents favor a plan similar to Medicare that would cover all Americans instead of the current mixed private and government insurance system. Here, political party is very important. More Democrats (75%) than Republicans (44%) are supportive of such a plan. Male Republicans (53%) are more likely to oppose the plan than female Republicans (39%).

Among health insurance-related issues, more Tennesseans (33%) consider increasing the number of Americans covered by health insurance as the most important, followed by helping seniors pay for prescription medicines (26%). Making Medicare more financially sound for future generations and lowering the cost of physician insurance were important issues for 20% and 14% of those surveyed, respectively.

### **Importing Canadian drugs popular: few follow Medicare drug plan, malpractice**

A full 62% of Tennesseans think that Congress and the President should make it legal for Americans to buy prescription drugs from Canada. Older people, (age 50-64 and 65+) understandably indicated strong support for legalization (66%) compared to only 40% of those in the 35-39 and 18-34 age groups.

Only a small number of Tennesseans (31%) follow the news about the Medicare drug plan somewhat closely. Older folks expectedly tend to follow Medicare news more closely with a larger number of older women tuning in more to the issue than the men.

Similarly only a few Tennesseans are paying attention to malpractice insurance news these days. The issue appears to be of more interest (40%) among Tennesseans who voted last November, with those in West and Middle Tennessee reporting that they follow the issue somewhat more closely than those in the eastern part of the state.

More than half of Tennesseans (56%) believe that too many malpractice suits are filed against physicians. Race is important here, with 60% of whites but only 34% of African Americans picking "too many."

A heavy majority favored capping malpractice awards (59%). Again, political orientation is important, with 52% of liberals but 69% of the right favoring a cap. For middle-of-the-roaders, 56% favored caps.

### **Education Tennessee's top problem; economy, health care move up**

Education remained the state's top problem, but the poor state of the economy moved ahead of government inefficiency and high taxes, compared with last spring's survey. Problems with the health care system also surfaced this fall.

The poor state of education was volunteered by 15% of respondents in an open-ended question, while 14% named the poor state of the economy, and 11% cited problems with health services and health insurance.

This contrasts with last spring's survey, where 16% named education and 14% each named government inefficiency and high taxes as the state's biggest problems. Clearly the public agenda has shifted.

### **Spending for elementary, secondary education a high priority**

Nearly three-fourths of Tennesseans (71%) feel that the state is spending too little on elementary and secondary education. Here, age is a significant predictor, with less than a majority (45%) of those 65 and over feeling that too little is spent, compared to 84% of those 18-34 and 72% of those between 35 and 64.

Fully 46% think too little is spent on community colleges and technical schools, while 35% think the right amount is spent. And for state universities, 45% believe too little is spent, while about one-third (31%) think that the spending is about right. Education is an important predictor of attitudes toward college spending, with nearly half (48%) of those with some college or above

feeling that too little is spent, a figure that drops to 39% for those with high school educations or less.

Should more state funding be necessary for higher education, 40% think it should come from taxes and 35% from higher tuition. But nearly one-fourth (23%) said they did not know or had no opinion.

Where TennCare is concerned, about four in 10 (39%) believe too little is spent, while 23% each believe that spending is about right or too much. Race is an important predictor here: Fully 70% of blacks think too little is spent, while only about one-third of whites (34%) feel likewise.

For welfare spending, the figures are rather even: 26% think too little is spent, 29% think spending is about right, and 30% think too much is spent. Here, again, race is important: 47% of blacks but only 24% of whites think too little is spent on welfare.

Respondents were also asked what university they would designate to receive \$100 of their tax money if they could choose. Nearly one-fourth (24%) of statewide respondents chose Middle Tennessee State University, followed by 18% for the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Tennessee Tech University was third at 9%, followed by East Tennessee State University at 8%, and the University of Tennessee at Martin and Tennessee State University at 6% each.

Here, geography was important: 42% of Middle Tennesseans chose MTSU, while 30% of East Tennesseans chose UTK, and 28% of West Tennesseans chose UTM.

### **Private universities, schools outrate public counterparts**

The deep political divisions that polarize Tennesseans in their ratings of President Bush or the Iraq war extend to attitudes toward education as well. A plurality of Tennesseans (43%) thinks private colleges and universities are better than their public counterparts – though more than one-third (34%) say they don't know which is better. Nearly two-thirds (62%) feel likewise about private primary and secondary schools, but here the “don't knows” drop to 19%.

For universities, the rating is polarized by political party, with a majority of Republicans (51%) rating private universities better, compared to 39% of Democrats and 38% of independents.

For primary and secondary schools, education level is the best predictor, with 69% of college graduates and above opting for private schools, as opposed to just over half (51%) of those with high school educations or less.

Asked why private primary and secondary schools are better, 83% say they provide a better education; 62% say they are safer; 64% say they provide a better moral environment; and 56% say they provide a better religious environment.

Regarding the religious environment, politics again surfaces, with nearly three-fourths (73%) on the right scoring private schools better, as opposed to about half (51%) of middle-of-the-roaders, and only 34% on the left.

When asked whether private schools are better because they are “less racially mixed,” only one in five (20%) agreed. But more than one-fourth (28%) of those preferring the racial mixture in private schools were high school graduates or less, compared to 16% for those with at least some college education.

### **Both Rush and the Chicks erred in speaking their opinions**

A solid majority of Tennesseans (54%) feels that conservative commentator Rush Limbaugh was wrong to say that black quarterback Donovan McNabb was overrated and that the sports media had been "very desirous of a black quarterback to do well." And virtually the same number of our respondents (55%) felt Dixie Chick singer Natalie Maines was wrong to tell a group in London that, because of the war in Iraq, she was ashamed that the president of the United States was from Texas.

As might be expected, attitudes toward Limbaugh were polarized by political orientation. A full 82% of liberals thought Limbaugh was wrong, a figure that drops to 59% among those in the middle. But only 40% of conservatives thought he was wrong.

Regarding Maines, the race of respondents was the best predictor of attitudes. Sixty-two percent of whites opted for "wrong," while a tiny 12% of blacks agreed. In fact, nearly two-thirds of blacks (64%) thought she was correct to speak out against Bush. Political party also played a role here, with 73% of Republicans and 52% of independents/other parties choosing "wrong." However, only 40% of Democrats thought she shouldn't have spoken against Bush.

About one-third (36%) of the sample said they like Limbaugh at least somewhat, though a majority (52%) said they did not like him at all. And 42% said they like the Chicks a great deal or somewhat, with 49% reporting that they were not fans at all. Fully 89% said they did not care that the Chicks decided no longer to define themselves as country singers.

**Sample and Method**

The poll was conducted Oct. 20 through Nov. 8, 2003 by students in the College of Mass Communication working under the direction of The Survey Group at Middle Tennessee State University. The poll was conducted in two waves, each with different batteries of items as well as some duplicate items.

For the first wave, which concluded Nov. 1, students interviewed 609 people age 18 or older from across the state whose telephone numbers were chosen at random by a computer. The first wave findings have an estimated error margin of  $\pm 4$  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 state population within 4 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. During the second wave, which concluded Nov. 1, students interviewed 395 people age 18 or older from across the state whose telephone numbers were chosen at random by a computer. For these findings, the error margin of  $\pm 5$  percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. Other factors, such as question wording also affect the outcome of a survey. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups.

The samples for both waves 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 relevant percentages for each wave:

	Census	First Wave			Second Wave		
		Sample	Weight	Result	Sample	Weight	Result
<b>Age:</b>							
<b>18-34</b>	29.9%	28.0%	1.07	31.7%	26.8%	1.12	31.8%
<b>35-49</b>	30.6%	29.7%	1.03	30.2%	30.9%	0.99	31.3%
<b>50-64</b>	23.0%	27.0%	0.85	22.2%	25.0%	0.92	21.7%
<b>65+</b>	16.5%	15.2%	1.09	16.0%	17.3%	0.96	15.3%
	100.0%	99.9%		100.1%	100.0%		100.1%
<b>Race:</b>							
<b>White</b>	83.8%	89.6%	0.94	84.1%	88.3%	0.95	83.6%
<b>Black</b>	15.0%	6.8%	2.20	14.6%	7.4%	2.02	15.0%
<b>Other</b>	1.2%	3.6%	0.35	1.3%	4.3%	0.29	1.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%		100.1%
<b>Gender:</b>							
<b>Male</b>	47.4%	45.3%	1.05	46.0%	43.8%	1.08	47.0%
<b>Female</b>	52.6%	54.7%	0.96	54.0%	56.2%	0.94	53.0%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%	100.0%		100.0%