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## Summary of Election Findings, Fall 2004

**Bush leads Kerry, especially among state’s white Evangelicals.** Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush holds a substantial lead over Democratic challenger John Kerry in Tennessee’s presidential race, especially among the state’s many white, Evangelical Christians. About half (50%) of Tennesseans age 18 and older say they would vote for Bush if the election were held today, while only 39% say they would choose Kerry. Bush’s lead over Kerry is somewhat wider among people who describe themselves as “very likely” to vote in the upcoming election. Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6197 or [kblake@mtsu.edu](mailto:kblake@mtsu.edu).

**Iraq, terrorism Bush’s strongest issues; Kerry dominates health care.** Most Tennesseans perceive Bush as better able than Kerry to handle the situation in Iraq (54%) and terrorism (59%). But more see Kerry (45%) than Bush (37%) as best suited for handling healthcare. On the economy, it’s a draw, with 45% choosing Bush and 44% choosing Kerry as best able to handle the situation. Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6197 or [kblake@mtsu.edu](mailto:kblake@mtsu.edu).

**But Tennesseans not all that issue savvy.** A close look at five key domestic agenda items suggests that Tennesseans as a group hardly qualify as well-informed and ideologically consistent policy wonks. On four of the five issues, only about half of a given candidate’s supporters hold opinions consistent with those of the candidate.

**Many favor positions inconsistent with their candidate.** Perhaps even more interestingly, sizable chunks of each candidate’s supporters favor positions held by the opposing camp. And when quizzed about which candidates hold which positions on the five issues, Tennesseans score an average of only two right answers – about the same result one could get by merely guessing. Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6197 or [kblake@mtsu.edu](mailto:kblake@mtsu.edu).

**Plurality say Bush has better morals than Kerry.** Over one-third (36%) of Tennesseans see Bush as having better morals than Kerry, while only 14% see Kerry as having better morals than Bush. Thirty percent consider the two equally moral, and 10% view neither one as moral. Meanwhile, a plurality (49%) of Tennesseans describe Bush and Kerry as equally intelligent. Just over a quarter (28%) perceive Kerry as more intelligent than Bush, and 15% say Bush is more intelligent than Kerry. Four percent see neither one as intelligent, and the rest aren’t sure. Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6197 or [kblake@mtsu.edu](mailto:kblake@mtsu.edu).

## Details of Election Findings, Fall 2004

### **Bush leads Kerry, especially among state's white Evangelicals**

Republican presidential nominee George W. Bush holds a substantial lead over Democratic challenger John Kerry in Tennessee's presidential race, especially among the state's many white, Evangelical Christians.

About half (50%) of Tennesseans age 18 and older say they would vote for Bush and running mate Dick Cheney if the election were held today. By contrast, only 39% say they would choose Kerry and running mate Sen. John Edwards. Three percent support someone else, and about 6% say they're undecided. Bush's lead over Kerry is somewhat wider among people who describe themselves as "very likely" to vote in the upcoming election. Here, 53% support Bush compared to the 38% favoring Kerry and the 5% who are undecided.

Recalling a pattern evident in last spring's MTSU Poll, Bush's support is strongest among Tennesseans who are white and who describe themselves as Evangelical Christians. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of such Tennesseans say they plan to vote for the Bush/Cheney ticket. Among well-educated individuals in this group, the proportion of Bush supporters approaches three-fourths (74%). Fully 64% of Tennesseans describe themselves as Evangelical compared to about 42% of people nationwide. Kerry, meanwhile, enjoys his greatest support among minorities and among non-Evangelical whites. Among minorities, 72% of whom support Kerry, only 17% support Bush. And among whites who do not identify themselves as Evangelicals, 45% support Kerry compared to the 41% who support Bush.

### **Iraq, terrorism Bush's strongest issues; Kerry dominates health care**

Most Tennesseans perceive Bush as better able than Kerry to handle the situation in Iraq (54%) and terrorism (59%). Just over a third (35%) think Kerry would handle Iraq better than Bush, and 11% aren't sure. On handling terrorism, just over a quarter (29%) say Kerry would do a better job than Bush, and about 12% aren't sure. Kerry fares somewhat better on domestic issues. On handling the economy, for example, 45% say Bush would do better than Kerry, but almost as many (44%) say Kerry would do better than Bush. About 10% are undecided.

When it comes to handling health care, 45% say Kerry would do a better job than Bush, and 37% say Bush would do a better job than Kerry. About 17% say they don't know. Across each of these issues, being white and being an Evangelical Christian are the best demographic predictors of choosing Bush as the most capable candidate.

For comparison, a Gallup poll of U.S. adults concluded Sept. 26 reported 55% saying Bush could best handle the war in Iraq compared to 41% choosing Kerry. In the same poll, 61% named Bush as best suited for handling terrorism, while 34% chose Kerry, and 51% said Bush could best handle the economy compared to 45% who chose Kerry. On healthcare, the Gallup poll reported, 49% of U.S. adults chose Kerry as best able to handle the issue, while 46% chose Bush.

Asked which issue – the economy, terrorism, Iraq, or health care – will be most important in their vote for president, 27% of Tennessee adults say Iraq, 25% say the economy, 23% say terrorism, and 18% say health care. A plurality of Republicans (39%) name terrorism as the most important issue, followed closely by 26% who cite Iraq as the top issue. Among

Democrats, meanwhile, 30% say the economy is the key concern, and almost as many (29%) choose Iraq. Among independents, the economy ranks first, with 31% calling it the most important issue. Iraq ranks second, with 25% choosing it as the most important issue. Nationally, a Gallup poll concluded Oct. 10 found that 29% of U.S. adults name the economy as their most important issue, followed by 26% who name terrorism, 22% who say Iraq, and 21% who choose health care.

### **But Tennesseans not all that issue savvy**

Despite the impression the above findings might give, a close look at five domestic agenda items suggests that Tennesseans as a group hardly qualify as well-informed, ideologically consistent policy wonks. For example, only about half of Tennessee adults can accurately name Kerry as the candidate who supports rescinding the recent federal income tax cuts for people earning over \$200,000 a year. About a quarter (23%) incorrectly attributed the proposal to Bush, and 27% admit they don't know which candidate supports the measure. Similarly, only about half (50%) rightly name Bush as the candidate who favors giving parents tax-funded vouchers to help pay private or religious school tuition. Thirteen percent attribute the plan to Kerry, who actually opposes it. Over a third (37%) admit they don't know.

Knowledge levels are even lower on the other three issues. Well under half (42%) are aware that Bush wants to let younger workers put some of their Social Security withholdings into their own personal retirement accounts. Nineteen percent incorrectly think Kerry supports the measure, and 40% say they don't know one way or the other. Just over a quarter (28%) rightly name Bush as the candidate who supports giving needy people tax breaks that would help buy health insurance from private companies. Thirty percent inaccurately name Kerry as the measure's proponent, and 41% admit not knowing. Finally, just 39% know that Kerry advocates requiring plants and factories to add new pollution control equipment when they make upgrades. Fifteen percent wrongly attribute the policy to Bush, and 45% don't know.

### **Many favor positions inconsistent with their candidate**

Asked for their own opinions on these same issues – with no clues given in the question regarding which candidates support which position – many Tennesseans express views contrary to those of the candidate they say they support. Only 54% of self-described Kerry partisans, for example, express support for Kerry's plan to retain the recent income tax cuts only for individuals earning less than \$200,000 a year. And about a third (32%) of Bush partisans say they like the idea, even though Bush opposes it. In a mirror image of that pattern, just about half (50%) of those backing Bush support Bush's plan for providing tax breaks to help needy people buy health insurance from private companies. And about a third (31%) of Kerry backers support the idea, even though Kerry favors an alternative strategy that would let more people qualify for government-funded insurance programs like Medicaid.

On vouchers, 52% of Bush supporters agree with Bush's stance, and so did 31% of Kerry supporters. Fifty-eight percent of Bush partisans favored Bush's Social Security plan, but so did 38% of Kerry backers. And 80 percent of Kerry backers, along with 71 percent of Bush backers, say they favor Kerry's plans for requiring factories and plans to install new pollution control equipment when upgrading.

Overall, in fact, Tennesseans averaged only two right answers when quizzed about which candidate held which view on the five issues. A fifth (20%) got no right answers, and 19% got one answer right. Another fifth (20%) got two right answers, and still another fifth (20%) got

three right answers. Only 13% got four right answers, and a mere 8% got all of the answers right. An analysis looking across the preferences expressed by respondent to these five issues found that only 6% gave unfailingly Democratic answers, and just 2% gave all Republican answers. At least on these issues, most Tennesseans cluster around an ideologically neutral center and, on average, venture no more than a net of two answers in the direction of being either consistently Democratic or consistently Republican.

Nevertheless, Tennesseans profess a high degree of interest in the campaign, with 71% describing themselves as “very interested,” and 23% as “somewhat interested.” Only 6% say they are “not at all interested.” Although high across the board, expressed interest is positively related to age, education, and income. Over a third (39%) say they watched the presidential debates at “every single opportunity.” Another 22% say they watched “most of the time,” and about a quarter (24%) say they watched “only some of the time.” Just 16% say they never watched.

### **Plurality say Bush has better morals than Kerry**

When it comes to morality, 36% of Tennesseans see Bush as having better morals than Kerry, and 14% see Kerry as having better morals than Bush. Thirty percent consider the two equally moral, and 10% view neither one as moral. The proportions shift dramatically in Bush’s favor among white Evangelical Christians, 48% of whom assert that Bush has better morals than Kerry. Among non-Evangelical whites, only 20% say Bush has the better morals. About half (49%) of white non-Evangelicals say the two are equally moral, a figure that falls to 27% among white Evangelicals. Among minorities, a plurality of 37% see Kerry is seen as having better morals than Bush.

Meanwhile, a plurality (49%) of Tennesseans describe Bush and Kerry as equally intelligent. Just over a quarter (28%) perceive Kerry as more intelligent than Bush, and 15% say Bush is more intelligent than Kerry. Four percent see neither one as intelligent, and the rest aren’t sure. Party identification is about the only predictor here, with most Republicans describing the two as equally intelligent (59%) and most Democrats (55%) describing Kerry as more intelligent than Bush.

**Appendix A: Measuring attitudes in polls**

Attitudes toward many issues – such as taxes, military actions, or immigrants – are complex. The same person may hold several contradictory notions and balance them off against each other to determine an overall attitude.

For example, in forming an attitude toward abortion, the same person may believe that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control. When asked bluntly whether he or she is in favor of abortion, that person might reply either “No” or “Yes.” This is because the same person could also believe that abortion is acceptable in cases of incest, rape, or serious defects in the fetus. To learn the person’s attitude, a survey researcher must therefore ask more than one question, then report the results in all their complexity.

**Appendix B: Sample and method**

The poll was conducted by telephone Oct. 4 to Oct. 15, 2004, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 624 people age 18 or older whose telephone numbers had been chosen at random by a computer from among all possible telephone numbers in the state. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4 percentage 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 percentage 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 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 Census data, the sample data, and the weights:

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
<b>Age:</b>				
<b>18-34</b>	29.6%	27.0%	1.10	29.6%
<b>35-49</b>	30.2%	25.5%	1.18	30.4%
<b>50-64</b>	23.6%	29.1%	0.81	22.9%
<b>65+</b>	16.6%	18.3%	0.91	17.0%
	100.0%	99.9%		99.9%
<b>Race:</b>				
<b>White</b>	83.7%	88.1%	0.95	83.6%
<b>Black</b>	15.0%	7.5%	2.00	15.0%
<b>Other</b>	1.3%	4.4%	0.29	1.4%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
<b>Gender:</b>				
<b>Male</b>	47.5%	46.3%	1.03	47.5%
<b>Female</b>	52.5%	53.7%	0.98	52.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

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.

**About the MTSU Poll**

Founded in Fall 1998, the MTSU Poll's mission is to provide independent, non-partisan, and unbiased public opinion data regarding major social, political, and ethical issues affecting Tennessee. Surveys are conducted twice yearly under the direction of faculty specialists in public opinion research in accordance with scientifically validated polling standards. Students serve as poll interviewers as an integral part of their training in mass communication. The poll's directors welcome suggestions about issues and topics from any individual or group. The poll's directors are, however, charged to select, formulate, and interpret results independent of outside interests. The poll fulfills the major goals of Middle Tennessee State University in that it provides an opportunity for student- and faculty- centered research in partnership with the citizens of Tennessee and the news media that serve them.