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Summary of Major Findings, Second Release, Fall 2004

Iraq/Afghanistan wars jump to No. 1 national problem. The Bush campaign and current events have focused many Tennesseans (23%) on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as the nation's leading problem. Last spring, the economy was ranked first by 19% of respondents. Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Tennesseans divided regarding progress in Iraq war. More than half of Tennesseans say that the war in Iraq is going badly. Political polarization is obvious, with 71% of Republicans reporting that the war is going moderately well and even 9% saying very well. By contrast, nearly half (47%) of Democrats and those who do not identify a party rate the war as going very badly and 38% moderately badly. Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Tennesseans generally pessimistic about nation's economy. Only about a third of Tennesseans (37%) consider the national economy either "excellent" (3 percent) or "good" (34%). The largest segment of the state rates the economy as "only fair" (42%), while a fifth (20%) characterize the economy as "poor." Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Poor health care Tennessee's No. 1 problem. The poor state of health care is named as the state's No. 1 problem by more Tennesseans (18%), followed closely by education (also 18% when rounded). Just 13% named the poor economy as the No. 1 issue. Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Evangelicals most passionate about "Passion of the Christ." Just under half (44%) of Tennesseans say they have seen Mel Gibson's movie "The Passion of the Christ," and most (63%) have either a "very favorable" or "somewhat favorable" opinion about the movie. Evangelicals are more likely to have seen the movie, to have a favorable opinion of it, and to assert that it has changed others' religious beliefs and practices. Contact Ken Blake, (615) 210-6187

Bredesen's high performance ratings continue. About two-thirds (63%) continue to approve of the job Phil Bredesen is doing as governor – down from the overwhelming 72% he merited in our spring 2004 poll but still very high. Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Confidence in military highest of all institutions. Confidence in the military – which tends to rise during wars – remained the highest of major political and social institutions, with 71% of Tennesseans expressing a great deal of confidence. Contact Robert Wyatt, (615) 477-8389.

Other findings: Support for gay rights stable • War Increases support for some media rights • Most say abortion should be legal under only a few circumstances • Majority support income tax with either sales tax cuts or right to vote on tax hikes • Most Tennesseans, especially churchgoers, continue to shun lottery.

Details of Major Fall 2004 Findings, Second Release

Iraq/Afghan wars jump to No. 1 national problem for Tennesseans

The Bush campaign and current events seem to have focused many Tennesseans (23%) on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan as the nation's leading problem. This represents quite a change from our spring 2004 poll, where the economy was ranked first by 19% of respondents. Today, Terrorism ranks second as leading problem (15%), while the poor state of the economy polls third (13%). This focus is good news for President Bush, who is widely perceived as being stronger than Kerry on the international front, where Kerry excels on internal issues such as the economy and health care.

Tennesseans divided regarding progress in Iraq war

More than half of Tennesseans say that the war in Iraq is going badly, with 26% saying it is going moderately badly and 27% very badly. Still, 40% consider the war to be going moderately well, but only 5% rate it as very well. Here, political polarization is obvious, with 71% of Republicans scoring it moderately well and even 9% indicating very well.

By contrast, nearly half (47%) of Democrats and those who do not identify a party label rate the war as going very badly and 38% moderately badly. For independents and others, 33% pick very badly and 28% moderately badly.

Even given this assessment of the war, just 43% say sending troops to Iraq was a mistake, while 53% say it was not. Again, partisan polarization is obvious, with only 12% of Republicans indicating that sending troops was a mistake, compared to 73% of Democrats and 48% of others. These findings also underline the fact that citizens are traditionally reluctant to consider a war a mistake even if it is going badly, probably out of respect for the cost to American troops.

Asked about TV network coverage of the war, respondents revealed complex perspectives. When asked about network fairness, the balance tipped slightly toward fairness, with 44% choosing generally fair, as opposed to 33% who said coverage was generally unfair. And 19% said coverage was no more fair than unfair. Again, political polarization was obvious, with 59% of Republicans responding that coverage was generally unfair, while 53% of Democrats, independents, and others said it was generally fair.

Other results regarding media fairness and bias were similar, though different question wordings produced different response distributions. When asked about network bias, 48% responded with biased, 14% with unbiased, and 33% with no more biased than unbiased, and fully 48% said the networks generally failed to tell the whole story. Opinion about media accuracy was evenly divided, however, with 29% picking generally accurate, 26% generally inaccurate, and 33% no more accurate than inaccurate. About a third (31%) found the networks generally untrustworthy, 25% generally trustworthy, and 38% no more trustworthy and untrustworthy. Again, political party and orientation proved important predictors of attitudes toward the networks.

Tennesseans generally pessimistic about nation's economy

Only about a third of Tennesseans (37%) consider the national economy either "excellent" (3 percent) or "good" (34%). The largest segment of the state rates the economy as "only fair"

(42%), while a fifth (20%) characterize the economy as “poor.” The rest aren’t sure. Party identification is a major predictor here, with 63% of Republicans rating the national economy as either “excellent” (7%) or “good” (56%). Only one Democrat – and none of the Independents – in the sample rated the economy as “excellent.” Eleven percent of Democrats rated the economy as “Good,” while 50% rated it as “only fair,” and 39% as “poor.” Among Independents, 30% characterized the economy as “good,” 47% as “only fair,” and 20% as “poor.” The rest weren’t sure.

Poor health care Tennessee’s No. 1 problem

Closer to home, the poor state of health care is named as the state’s No. 1 problem by more Tennesseans (18%), followed closely by education (also 18% when rounded). Just 13% named the poor economy as the No. 1 issue. Domestically, then, as well as internationally, the economy has been trumped by other issues. This finding regarding health care is probably a plus for Kerry.

Evangelicals most passionate about “Passion of the Christ”

Just under half (44%) of Tennesseans say they have seen Mel Gibson’s movie “The Passion of the Christ,” and most (63%) have either a “very favorable” (40%) or “somewhat favorable” (23%) opinion about the movie. Twelve percent have “mixed” opinions, while 3% hold “unfavorable” opinions, and another 3% hold “very unfavorable” opinions about it. Seventeen percent say they don’t know how they feel about the movie.

For comparison, our spring poll, conducted when a scant 3% of Tennesseans had seen the movie, found favorable opinions about the movie among 57% of state residents. In the latest poll, about a fifth (19%) of state residents say they have bought the movie on videotape or DVD. The movie was released in theaters last spring and on home video at the end of the summer.

Nearly half (49%) of self-described Evangelical Christians say they saw the movie, compared to only about a quarter (27%) of non-Evangelicals. Among Evangelicals, males age 18-34 were more likely to have seen the movie than either Evangelical females in the same age group or older Evangelicals of either gender. Evangelicals also were more likely to have a favorable opinion of the movie compared to non-Evangelicals. Specifically, 70% of Evangelicals report having either a very favorable (48%) or somewhat favorable (22%) opinion of the movie. Among non-Evangelicals, 18% have a very favorable opinion, and 26% have a somewhat favorable opinion, for a total of 44%. Also, 23% of Evangelicals bought the movie on home video, compared to just 8% of non-Evangelicals.

A slight majority (52%) of Tennesseans speculate that the movie has caused other people to make “changes in their religious beliefs,” and slightly more (61%) suspect the movie has caused other people to make “changes in their religious practices like going to worship services, praying, reading scripture, or trying to live better lives.” The actual degree of such effects, though, seems to be less. About a fifth (19%) of Tennesseans say the film has caused them to make changes in their own religious beliefs, and just under a quarter (24%) say the film has prompted them to make changes in their own religious practices. The disparity may be an example of a principle public opinion theorists call the “third-person effect,” which states in part that people perceive others as more susceptible than themselves to influence by media messages.

Fifty-seven percent of Evangelicals think the movie has prompted a change of religious beliefs in others, and even more Evangelicals (68%) think the movie has prompted a change of religious practices in others. Among non-Evangelicals, by contrast, only 36% think the movie caused others to change religious beliefs, and 40% think the movie caused others to change religious practices.

The poll found a similar pattern of perceived effects – although with far smaller percentages – on the question of whether the film had promoted anti-Jewish attitudes. Twelve percent of Tennesseans asserted that the film had “caused others to become more anti-Jewish in their attitudes,” but only about 2% said their own attitudes had become more anti-Jewish as a result of the film. A plurality (42%) said the film blames Jesus’ death primarily on “all humanity.” Twelve percent said the film blames the Jews and the Romans equally, 6% said the film blames the Jews primarily, and 4% said the film primarily blames the Romans. About a third (34%) said they simply didn’t know.

Even though scholars have noted that some movie scenes vary from Gospel accounts or are missing entirely from the Gospels, two thirds (66%) say the movie represents an accurate historical portrayal of the last 12 hours of Jesus’ life. Ten percent say it doesn’t, and 23% say they don’t know. Last spring, just over a majority (56%) considered the movie historically accurate. Most (59%) say the amount of violence in the movie was “necessary for the film’s message,” while 13% characterize the movie as portraying an unnecessary amount of violence. A quarter (25%) say they don’t know.

Nearly two-thirds (65%) say they have talked with others about the movie either “often” (31%) or “sometimes” (34%), and 59% said they followed news reports about the movie either “very closely” (23%) or “somewhat closely” (36%). Attention to news about the movie is unchanged from last spring, but more today report talking frequently with others about the movie compared to the 49% in the spring poll who had talked about the movie either “often” or “sometimes.”

Frequency of attending worship services correlates positively with frequency of talking about the movie. Of those who attend worship services almost every week or more, 73% say they have talked about the movie either often (39%) or sometimes (34%). By contrast, 61% of those who attend once a month or “seldom” have talked either often (23%) or sometimes (38%) about the movie.

Of those who never attend worship services, only 17% have talked about the movie often, and 23% have talked about it sometimes – a total of 40%. Reflecting, perhaps, the buzz generated on the Internet by the film, Internet users among the frequent and moderately frequent worship service attendees are significantly more likely to have talked about the film than people in those groups who do not use the Internet.

Bredesen’s high performance ratings continue

About two-thirds (63%) continue to approve of the job Phil Bredesen is doing as governor – down from the overwhelming 72% he merited in our spring 2004 poll but still very high. Age is tightly linked to Bredesen approval, with 83% over 65 approving, compared to 67% of those 35-64 and only 45% for those under 35. A striking finding, however, is that another 45% of those under 35 say they simply do not know what kind of job he is doing – indicating inattention to politics.

Bredesen continues to draw strong support from those of all political persuasions, with 65% approval among Democrats, 63% among Republicans, and 63% among independents.

The State Legislature, by contrast to Bredesen, merits approval from only 40%. And here, party affiliation is particularly important. Among Democrats, a hearty 60% approve of the Legislature's performance, while only about one-third (32%) of non-Democrats approve.

A healthy 69% of Tennesseans approve of the way things are going in the state at this time. Interestingly, far more Republicans (84%) are satisfied than non-Republicans (61%).

Concerning the state's economy, ratings are fair-to-middling. Only 2% rate Tennessee's economy as excellent, while 39% score it as good and 45% score it as only fair. Even 12% rate the economy poor. A majority of Republicans (53%) score the economy as good, compared to 38% of independents and just 22% of Democrats.

Lottery director Rebecca Paul's approval rating remains stable, with 41% approval – statistically indistinguishable from her 43% rating in spring 2004. Males (52%) are more likely to approve of Paul than females (32%).

Confidence in military highest of all political and social institutions

Confidence in the military – which tends to rise during wars – remained the highest of major political and social institutions, with fully 71% of Tennesseans expressing a great deal of confidence. Medicine – traditionally high regardless of political conditions – scored second, with 38% expressing great confidence, while the Supreme Court ranked third (32% great confidence). Organized religion followed at fourth, with 23% high confidence, and the executive branch of government too fifth, with 23% high confidence.

Surprisingly, given recent criticisms following 9/11, the CIA (18% great confidence) beat out organized labor (16%), major companies (12%), and, last, the press (10%) and television (9%). Regarding the CIA, Republicans (26%) were more likely than Democrats (14%) to express great confidence. Fully 23% of Democrats expressed hardly any confidence, compared to 11% of Republicans.

Support for Gay Civil Rights, Gay Marriage/Unions Stable

Support for equal job and housing rights for gay men and lesbians has hovered near 80% since the question was first asked on the MTSU Poll – and any variation up or down has been within the poll's margin of error. In the current survey, again, 81% of Tennesseans support both job and housing rights for gays, indicating a firm stand against depriving gays of these basic rights.

Where gay civil unions and marriages are concerned, however, support is reversed. Support for gay marriage rights – asked of half of respondents – continues at 20%, a figure identical with last spring's poll. When question wording for the other half of respondents is changed to indicate "gay civil unions" that carry the same right as marriage but do not use the term "marriage", support jumps to 36%. This figure is marginally higher than the 31% who supported such unions in the spring 2004 poll. Only additional surveys can indicate whether this represents a trend.

Support even for gay civil rights is related firmly to religious convictions. For example, 88% of those who do not believe that the Bible is the literal word of God support gay job rights,

compared to 70% of literalists. But even among literalists, support for gay rights is strong. A similar 90% of non-literalists support gay housing rights, compared to 72% of literalists.

Gay marital rights are a different story. Where gay marriage is concerned, fully 83% of those who describe themselves as “born again” or Evangelical Christians are opposed – compared to 56% of others. With gay civil unions, fully 73% of Evangelicals are opposed, compared to just 37% of non-evangelicals. Previous research has indicated that most Tennesseans simply cannot conceive of marriage as a non-religious civil contract.

War Seems To Increase Support for Some Media Rights

More than one-third (36%) of Tennesseans say that the right of journalists to report classified information the government wishes to keep secret should be protected all the time. And fully 42% say that right should be protected under certain circumstances.

The war in Iraq seems to have increased such support. For example, in spring 2002, long before the war, unconditional protection stood at 29%, a figure that moved to 32% in spring 2003, when war was imminent.

When the issue is criticizing politicians, fully 45% would protect journalists’ right all of the time and another 25% under certain circumstances. The same pattern is evident regarding protecting the right of journalists to side with foreign governments that disagree with U.S. positions. For example, today 35% would protect that right unconditionally and 25% under certain circumstance. In 2002, just 32% offered unconditional protection and 18% protection under certain circumstance. But as war loomed in spring 2004, the figures neared their current level, with 36% unconditional and 21% under certain circumstances. And a question regarding reporting about national security without government approval produced similar results.

When the focus shifts to those responsible for the war – political leaders and the military – things become more complex. While a majority (52%) in spring 2002 would protect unconditionally the right of journalists to criticize politicians, that figure dropped to 46% in spring 2003 and remains about there (45%) today.

For criticizing the military, about one-third (36%) were willing to protect journalists’ rights unconditionally in spring 2002, a figure that rose to 36% during the uncertain time when war loomed. Support for such unconditional protection has now risen to 42%.

Interestingly, then politicians are cut more slack than the military – particularly when the war seems to man to be going badly and prisoner-abuse scandals fill news headlines.

Most say abortion should be legal under only a few circumstances

Most Tennesseans (55%) say abortion should be legal only under “certain circumstances.” About 15% say abortion should be legal in all circumstances, and a quarter (25%) think abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. Of the 55% who say abortion should be legal only under certain circumstances, by far the greatest number (83%) say they’re talking about only a “few circumstances,” while 12% say they’re talking about “most circumstances.”

Religious views proved a key factor in the responses. Specifically, 40% those who consider the Bible to be the “actual word of God” to be taken “literally, word for word” say abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. Forty-seven percent of those in this group say abortion should be

legal under certain circumstances, and 7% say it should be legal in all circumstances. Among those who consider the Bible the “inspired word of God” but say that not everything in the Bible should be taken literally, only 14% say abortion should be illegal in all circumstances, 66% say it should be legal under certain circumstances, and 16% say it should be legal under all circumstances. Finally, just 4 % of those who call the Bible “an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men” assert that abortion should be illegal in all circumstances. Forty-five percent of those in this group say it should be legal under certain circumstances, and 51% say it should be legal under all circumstances.

Majority support income tax with either sales tax cuts or right to vote on tax hikes

Over half of Tennesseans (59%) say they would support a state income tax plan that included eliminating the sales tax on groceries and lowering the sales tax on other items. A majority (52%) also say they would favor an income tax plan requiring voter approval of tax increases. The level of support for an income tax paired with removing grocery taxes and scaling back other sales taxes rose past the majority point in the Fall 2002 MTSU Poll, a few months after the state Legislature raised Tennessee’s sales tax rate by a penny. Support has remained at a majority level in every MTSU Poll since.

Age best predicts attitudes toward an income tax with sales tax cuts. Among Tennesseans age 18-34, over two-thirds (67%) either strongly favor (39%) or favor (28%) such a measure. Among those age 65 and older, 63% either strongly favor (27%) or favor (36%) the measure, and 58% of those age 35 to 49 either strongly favor (26%) or favor (32%) the idea. Support dips below a majority for those age 50 to 64, among whom 46% either strongly favor (26%) or favor (20%) the idea.

A plan that includes voter approval of tax increases would be most popular among the state’s political moderates, 60% of whom either strongly favor (29%) or favor (31%) the idea. Support drops to just under a majority among those tending either toward the right, 46% of whom favor or strongly favor the idea, or toward the left, 47% of whom favor or strongly favor the idea.

Other conditions prompt lesser degrees of overall support. For example, an income tax plan including a limit on state spending draws 46% approval, as does a plan requiring any budget surpluses to be returned to tax payers after replenishing a state emergency fund. Meanwhile, 40% would favor a tax plan exempting the first \$15,000 of income, and 36% would favor a plan that featured a “flat” tax rate charging everyone the same amount per dollar of income. Only 20% favor an income tax with no mention of any of these trade-offs, but 80% favor an income tax plan coupled with at least one of these trade-offs.

Most Tennesseans, especially churchgoers, continue to shun lottery

Nearly two-thirds of Tennesseans say they have never played any of the state’s lottery games. Sixty-two percent say they’ve never played any of the lottery’s “scratch off” games, and 64% say they’ve never played any of the jackpot drawing games like Cash 3, PowerBall, or Lotto 5. About a fourth (24%) of state residents say they play scratch-off games once a month, 7% say they play once a week, 4% report playing several times a week, and less than 1% indicate they play every day. These percentages are similar to those found in the Spring 2004 poll, except that the proportion playing scratch-off games once a month has risen from the spring’s 17%, and the proportion playing once a week has declined from the spring’s 12%.

Regarding jackpot drawing games, 18% play “rarely,” 14% play “pretty often,” and 4% play “every time there’s a drawing.” Jackpot drawings weren’t available yet at the time the Spring 2004 poll was conducted, but asked how they would respond once the drawings had begun, 40% said they would never play, 30% said they would rarely play, 19% said they would play pretty often, and 6% said they would play every time there was a drawing. Generally, then, Tennesseans have played jackpot drawing games less frequently than they predicted they would. Still, though, these estimates suggest lottery ticket sales are substantial. For example, the 17% who play jackpot drawings at least “pretty often” translate into just over 766,000 of the state’s estimated 4.5 million people age 18 or older.

Both scratch-off and jackpot drawing lottery games are least popular among those who attend worship services nearly every week or more. Seventh-three percent of such individuals say they have never played a scratch-off game compared to 48% of those who attend once a month or less. Similarly, 74% of those who attend almost every week or more have never played a jackpot drawing game compared to 51% of those who attend once a month or less.

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
Age:				
18-34	29.6%	27.0%	1.10	29.6%
35-49	30.2%	25.5%	1.18	30.4%

50-64	23.6%	29.1%	0.81	22.9%
65+	16.6%	18.3%	0.91	17.0%
	100.0%	99.9%		99.9%
Race:				
White	83.7%	88.1%	0.95	83.6%
Black	15.0%	7.5%	2.00	15.0%
Other	1.3%	4.4%	0.29	1.4%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	46.3%	1.03	47.5%
Female	52.5%	53.7%	0.98	52.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Small variations in reported percentages (1% or less) sometimes result for 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.