

## Summary of Political Findings, Fall 2006

**Tennessee's U.S. Senate race a dead heat among likeliest voters.** The state is in for a squeaker of a race if current patterns continue. Forty-two percent of likeliest voters favor Harold Ford Jr., but a statistically even 43% support Bob Corker. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**Bredesen well ahead of Bryson in governor's race.** Gov. Phil Bredesen leads Republican challenger Jim Bryson 59% to 21% among the state's likeliest voters. A fifth are undecided. Among all Tennesseans, 52% favor Bredesen, and 19% favor Bryson. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**Frist looking a tad more presidential to Tennesseans, but many unsure.** Thirty percent of Tennesseans say they would choose U.S. Sen. Bill Frist over a Democratic rival if Frist ran for president. Last fall, 24% said they would support Frist. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**Gay marriage support tanks as state constitutional ban nears.** Support for gay marriage appears to have weakened to 21%, while support for gay civil unions, which carry many of the rights of marriage, appears unchanged at 33%. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Could a new car, \$1 million cause the "wrong people" to vote?** Only a third support using a lottery or new car as a voting incentive; most fear this would bring out the wrong kind of people. Majorities support voter holidays, time off from work, and child care. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Most hawkish on Iran, but half say Iraq war was a mistake.** Over half (56%) say the U.S. should take military action against Iran if that country continues nuclear development, but about half (51%) say sending troops to Iraq was a mistake. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**Grim national mood still a party matter.** Though the national barometer averages 35, Republicans perceive the mood at a rosy 71. By contrast, Democrats and those who gave no party identification rate the mood at 12. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Perception of national economy and direction still sour.** Fully 47% of Tennesseans rate the national economy as fair and 18% poor. One-fourth (25%) are satisfied with the country's direction, down from 31% last spring. Political polarization again rules. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Bush's approval remains low.** The President's approval is stuck at 40%, shading down insignificantly from 42% last spring and 40% last fall. But fully 77% of Republicans express approval, compared with 31% of independents and 10% of Democrats. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**War in Iraq/Afghanistan remains top national problem.** More than one-fifth (22%) still name the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan the top national problem, down non-significantly from 25% last spring. Terrorism scored second; the President is ranked third. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

## Details of Political Findings, Fall 2006

### Tennessee's U.S. Senate race a dead heat among likeliest voters

Tennessee is in for one squeaker of a U.S. Senate race if current public opinion patterns continue. With a little over a month remaining until Election Day, 42% of the state's likeliest voters favor Democratic candidate Harold Ford Jr., but a statistically even 43% of them support Republican candidate Bob Corker. Sixteen percent are undecided.

Among all Tennessee adults – both those likely to vote and those less so – 40% favor Ford, 35% favor Corker, nearly a quarter (24%) don't know, and the rest declined to answer.

There are interesting regional differences in the race. Among the likeliest voters in East Tennessee, Corker leads Ford 53 percent to 32 percent, with 15 percent undecided. But among the likeliest voters in both West and Middle Tennessee, Ford leads Corker 48 percent to 36 percent with 16 percent undecided.

Because the same regional patterns are evident among all possible voters and not just the most likely voters, regional differences in voter turnout could substantially influence the election's outcome.

"Likeliest voters" are those who reported being registered to vote, having voted in the last statewide election, and being "very likely" to vote in next month's election. The measure is a rough prediction at best of who will make it to the polls. Fully 64% of the sample met the criteria for being included in the category, a figure far higher than the typical voter turnout rate. Odds are that many of even these individuals will end up not voting.

Party affiliation is, of course, a strong predictor here, with Republicans generally favoring Corker and Democrats generally favoring Ford. Behind measures of party identification, though, race is the top predictor, with 77% of minorities favoring Ford compared to 33% of whites. Among whites, Corker has an edge among male likely voters, while he and Ford run evenly among female likely voters.

Attitudes toward the Iraq war may play a role, too. Among Tennesseans who think sending troops to Iraq was a mistake, more favor Ford (63%) than Corker (15%) with the rest undecided. Among those who think sending troops to Iraq was not a mistake, however, 60% favor Corker, 16% favor Ford, and the remaining quarter or so are undecided. Attitudes toward immigration appear unrelated to preferences for one candidate or the other.

A plurality of Tennesseans (42%) say they have no idea who is leading whom in the Senate race. A quarter (24%) think Ford is ahead, and about as many (25%) think Corker is ahead.

Forty-three percent of Tennesseans perceive Ford's TV campaign advertising as either "entirely" or "mostly" truthful, while somewhat fewer (36%) say the same thing about Corker's TV ads. Over half (53%) think truthful TV ads help politicians gain "a lot" of votes, but only about a quarter (26%) think untruthful ads do so. Despite this relatively low belief that candidates can gain votes with untruthful ads, nearly three-fourths (74%) say the law should forbid such ads.

### Bredesen well ahead of Bryson in governor's race

Gov. Phil Bredesen leads Republican challenger Jim Bryson 59% to 21% among the state's likeliest voters. A fifth (20%) of the state's likeliest voters remain undecided. Bredesen holds a similar lead among Tennesseans in general – that is, both the likeliest to vote and those less likely to vote – where 52% favor Bredesen, 19% favor Bryson, and 29% are undecided.

Bredesen has the support of a strong majority of Democrats (79%) and a plurality of independents and the politically unaffiliated (49%). Among Republicans, 34% favor Bredesen, 37% favor Bryson, and about a quarter (28%) are undecided.

### **Frist looking a tad more presidential to Tennesseans, but many unsure**

Thirty percent of Tennesseans say they would choose Sen. Bill Frist over a Democratic rival if Frist were to run for president. The figure has inched up since last fall, when 24% said they would support a presidential bid by Frist.

Under a quarter (22%) said they would choose a Democratic rival instead of Frist, a figure identical to the proportion from last fall. The findings suggest that attitudinal shifts among undecideds may account for most of the uptick in Frist's support. But as was the case last fall, a plurality of Tennesseans (39%) say they don't know which they would vote for.

Behind the obvious predictor of party affiliation, race and religion play key roles in attitudes toward a presidential run by Frist. Far more whites (35%) than minorities (5%) say they would back Frist. And among whites, support for Frist runs higher among self-described evangelical Christians (42%) than among nonevangelicals (29%).

### **Gay marriage support tanks as state constitutional ban nears**

As Tennessee nears a probable constitutional ban on gay marriage, support for gay marriage appears to have weakened, while support for gay civil unions, which carry many of the rights of marriage, appears unchanged.

In our current poll, nearly three-quarters (74%) say that the law should not recognize gay marriage, while 21% disagree. Before the recent flurry of political activity, support for gay marriage had remained virtually unchanged. In last spring's poll, 69% did not support legal gay marriage. In our spring 2005 poll, the figure was 70%, while in spring 2004, it was 69%.

In the current poll, political rather than religious orientation best predicts opposing legal gay marriage. Fully 92% of those identifying themselves as conservatives or on the far right oppose legalization, compared to 61% of all others.

However, support for gay civil unions has not eroded. Nearly one-third (33%) of Tennesseans would support gay civil unions, although, again, an overwhelming 59% oppose unions. Political orientation again proved the strongest predictor, with nearly one half (48%) of liberals and middle-of-the-roaders supporting civil unions, compared with only 21% of all others.

In spring 2004, the last time we measured support for civil unions, 32% were in favor and 61% opposed. In both our 2006 and 2004 polls, respondents were randomly assigned either to a question about gay marriage or to a question about gay unions.

### **Could a new car, \$1 million cause the “wrong people” to vote?**

An Arizona politician recently introduced a whole new possibility for stimulating voter turnout when he proposed that each voter be given a chance at a \$1 million lottery. The issue raised was why economic incentives – long a staple of product marketing – should not be used to increase Americans' dismal voter turnout. We wanted to know what Tennesseans thought about a variety of incentives, ranging from fines to car-giveaways.

A full 86% of Tennesseans initially told us that they thought more people should vote. In fact, 90% of those very likely to vote in the upcoming Senate race wished more people would vote, compared to 74% of those less likely to vote.

But when fines or giveaways were introduced as negative and positive incentives, support was weak. For example, only 10% supported a \$100 fine, though blacks (30%) were more likely to support a fine than whites and others (7%). A \$1,000 fine dropped overall support to 5% (17% among blacks and 2% among whites).

Offering each voter a \$1 million lottery fared better, with nearly one-third (32%) supporting. However, here, the fear that incentives might cause the “wrong kind of people to vote” took hold. Among those who thought the wrong people might vote, support dropped to 24%. But, for those who did not fear the lottery as a stimulus, 44% were supportive.

A drawing for a new car gained support from just 31%, a number similar to the lottery. And the fear of stimulating the wrong kind of people also proved predictive, with 22% support among the fearful and 43% among those with no concern about the wrong people voting.

However, making each election-day a holiday raised no such fears. Fully 55% proved supportive of the move, with two-thirds (69%) of those age 18-34 and 53% of those age 35-64 expressing approval. Even those age 65 and older almost gave majority support (47%).

Free childcare was even more popular, with 64% overall support. Support was very strong (72%) among Democrats, independents, and all others. And a majority (51%) of Republicans joined them. And time off from work pulled 81% support, with no political or age divisions.

Internet voting was opposed by 61% of our respondents, but a majority (58%) of those 18-35 proved supportive, while 40% opposed the move. For other age groups, 58% of those age 35-49 were opposed, followed by 70% of those age 50-64 and 71% of those 65 or older.

A clear majority (56%) say these incentives would not influence their own decision about whether to vote. But, when race is considered, blacks overwhelmingly (70%) believe incentives would encourage them to vote, while fewer than a third (30%) of whites concur.

In summary, Tennesseans favor work- and family-related incentives such as holidays, child care, and time off from work. These incentives, interestingly enough, do not raise the specter of the “wrong kind of people” voting, as do financial incentives such as a lottery or a new car. Fines were generally very unpopular, but less so among blacks than whites. Thus, financial incentives, whether positive (a car, a lottery) or negative (fines) – though universal in the marketplace and the legal world – are in disfavor where the vote is concerned. And this despite the profusion of marketing and financial incentives involved in election campaigns and political favoritism.

**Most hawkish on Iran, but half say Iraq war was a mistake.**

Over half (56%) of Tennesseans say the U.S. should take military action against Iran if that country continues to develop nuclear capability. But at the same time, about half (51%) say sending troops to Iraq was a mistake, a figure similar to the proportion found last spring (48%).

More Republicans (72%) than Democrats, independents and others (46%) would favor military action against Iran over Iran's nuclear program. Behind party identification, evangelical Christian identity is the strongest predictor, with 59% of evangelicals favoring military action compared to 46% of others.

As for the wisdom of sending troops to Iraq, sharp divisions are of course evident along party lines. Fully 83% of Democrats say the war was a mistake compared to 62% of independents and just 21% of Republicans. But beneath party affiliation, attitudes break across race, age, and religion. Specifically, 49% of whites call the war a mistake compared to 88% of minorities. And among whites, older Tennesseans in general are more critical of the war's initiation than are younger ones, particularly those who describe themselves as evangelical Christians.

Meanwhile, in the wake of this summer's war in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah, over two-thirds (69%) of Tennesseans doubt Israel and Arab nations will ever get along, and half say striving for peace in the region is none of the United States' business.

### **Grim national mood still a party matter**

Though the national barometer averages a grim 35 out of 100 compared to a state mood of 61, Tennessee's Republicans perceive the national mood at a rosy 71. By contrast, Democrats and those who gave no party identification rate the mood at a dismal 12, while independents and others rate the mood at 25. Polarization here is extreme.

About 31% of our sample here identified themselves as Republicans, 37% as Democrats or those with no affiliation, and 31% as independents.

### **Perception of national economy and direction still sour**

Fully 47% of Tennesseans rate the national economy as only fair and 18% poor. Again, political party comes to the fore, with 52% of Republicans rating the economy good and only 5% poor. Only 32% of independents and others rate the economy good, and only 19% of Democrats agree.

Only one-fourth (25%) are satisfied with the direction the country is going, down from 31% last spring. Here, the gap between identification is particularly obvious, with a majority (53%) of Republicans satisfied, compared to a mere 12% among Democrats, independents, and the rest.

### **Bush's approval remains low**

President Bush's is stuck at 40% in a state that once supported him strongly, shading down insignificantly from 42% last spring and 40% last fall. Again, Republicans seem to inhabit a different world from Democrats, independents, and those with no affiliation.

Fully 77% of Tennessee's Republicans and those who refused identification approved of Bush's handling of the presidency, compared with 31% of independents and those with other affiliations

and 10% of Democrats and those listing no affiliation. Polarization clearly indicates that Republicans reflect a different reality than Democrats and independents.

The polarization extends to the president's handling of the U.S. campaign against terrorism and the war in Iraq. For example, over three-fourths (79%) of Republicans like how Bush is dealing with terrorism. Only 37% of independents and those with no affiliation agree, and just 12% of Democrats agree. Similarly, 67% of Republicans approve of how Bush is handling the situation in Iraq compared to 27% of independents and the unaffiliated and just 8% of Democrats.

Overall, 43% approve of how Bush is handling terrorism, and 35% approve of how he is handling Iraq.

### **War in Iraq/Afghanistan remains top national problem**

More than one-fifth (22%) of Tennesseans still name the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan as the top national problem, down slightly but non-significantly from 25% last spring. Terrorism scored second, at 17%, replacing last spring's economy in second place. In third place is the President himself, named by 12%.

Despite the prominence of immigration as a political issue, only 2% volunteered immigrants or immigration issues.

### **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: Evangelicalism in Tennessee**

The label “Evangelical” is claimed by subgroups within a wide array of Christian types including Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Lutherans, and more. To complicate matters, many self-described Evangelicals attend non-denominational churches, and still others hold Evangelical beliefs and exhibit Evangelical behaviors without identifying with or even recognizing the term “Evangelical.” In short, Evangelicalism is an abstraction, and there is no perfect way to measure it. But whatever it is, Evangelicalism is a strong force in Tennessee politics, and an interpretation of Tennessee attitudes would be incomplete without some attempt to account for it.

The MTSU Poll assesses Evangelicalism by asking individuals whether they consider themselves an “Evangelical or born-again” Christian and also by measuring three themes often found in Evangelical belief and practice: Belief that the Bible is the “actual word of God” and should be “taken literally, word for word,” belief that “Jesus will return to earth and take all true Christians to heaven, leaving non-Christians here to face tribulation and the Antichrist,” and a personal history of having “tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior.” In Tennessee, all three measures correlate positively and strongly – although not perfectly – with self-identification as an Evangelical, and when one or more of these measures emerges as a significant predictor, the predictor is assumed to accurately characterize the attitudes of Evangelicals.

### **Appendix C: Sample and method**

The poll was conducted by telephone Sept. 19-30, 2006 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 549 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of  $\pm$  about 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
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<b>Age:</b>				
18-34	28.9%	21.3%	1.36	29.1%
35-49	29.6%	26.4%	1.12	30.6%
50-64	24.8%	32.9%	0.75	24.2%
65+	16.8%	19.4%	0.86	16.1%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
<b>Race:</b>				
White	83.6%	85.9%	0.97	82.1%
Black	15.1%	8.4%	1.80	16.6%
Other	1.3%	5.7%	0.23	1.4%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.1%
<b>Gender:</b>				
Male	47.5%	48.6%	0.98	47.7%
Female	52.5%	51.4%	1.02	52.3%
	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.