

Summary of State Findings, Fall 2006

Growth's impact on jobs, living standard appealing. But, oh, the traffic!

Improvements in job availability and the standard of living are the most commonly named benefits of growth in the state's population and economy. But growth-induced traffic woes draw loud complaints, especially in the Midstate. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

Attitudes towards immigrants not improved by politically correct terminology. A majority (52%) think immigration is a good thing, but 53% also want to reduce levels. In an experiment, fully 60% think "illegal" immigrants make life worse, while another 58% say "undocumented" immigrants make life worse. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

Nashvillians among the least pleased with their local schools. Tennesseans give their local school a C average. Compared to people elsewhere in the state, metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County residents give their schools a C-minus. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

Legislature approval up, but still low. Forty percent of Tennesseans approve of the job the Legislature is doing. Although under a majority, the figure represents an upward climb from last spring. *(Contact Ken Blake)*

Health care No. 1 state problem again. Health care continues to be Tennessee's No. 1 problem, named by 19%. Health care emerged as the No. 1 problem in spring 2004. Education, crime, and the economy follow. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

Tennessee mood brightens; national mood sour. The Tennessee barometer stands at a high of 61. The national barometer stands is 35. Each barometer is an index of chief-executive approval, economic perception, and the direction of the nation or state. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

Bredesen's rating shades upward. Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval stands at 57%, up insignificantly from 54% last spring but down from 61% in spring 2005. Bredesen is approved equally by Democrats and Republicans. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

Perception of state economy and direction looking up. A full 42% rate Tennessee's economy good, but 41% rate it fair. Republicans and independents (52%) rate the economy as good, compared to 22% of Democrats and others. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

Details of State Findings, Fall 2006

Growth's impact on jobs, living standard appealing. But, oh, the traffic!

More than a third (37%) of Tennesseans say economic and population growth in the state has made living in Tennessee better. About two-fifths (44%) say growth has had little impact on the quality of life here, and another 13% say growth has made life worse. The rest aren't sure.

Probed on some specific aspects of such growth, Tennesseans seem happiest about the impact on the state's job opportunities and standard of living. Still, just a third (35%) say growth has improved the state's standard of living. Forty-two percent say growth has left the standard of living about the same, and 19% say growth has made the standard of living worse. Similarly, 32% say growth has improved chances of getting a job, 35% say growth has left those chances about the same, and 29% say growth has made chances of getting a job worse.

But a solid majority (55%) of Tennesseans say growth has made the daily traffic and parking situation worse. About a third (34%) say growth has left traffic and parking unchanged, and only 6% say growth has improved traffic and parking conditions.

Asked, in effect, how close to home the results of growth have reached, about a quarter (25%) say growth has improved life in their own neighborhood. Over half (55%) say the changes have had no impact on their neighborhood, good or bad, and 15% say growth has made life in their neighborhood worse.

Attitudes toward growth vary along lines that define social class, race and geographic location. For instance, 43% of Tennesseans with at least some higher education say growth has made life here better overall. Among Tennesseans with only a high school diploma or less, just over a quarter (27%) say growth has made life here better.

And among the state's better-educated residents, those living in Middle Tennessee are the happiest of all. Fully 53% say growth has made life here better. In East and West Tennessee, only about a third (37%) of better-educated residents say growth has made life here better.

Similarly, 40% of Middle and East Tennesseans think growth has improved the state's standard of living, with the better-educated most likely to say so. But just 21% of West Tennesseans agree. And when it comes to job availability, many more whites (36%) than minorities (13%) say growth has made jobs more plentiful. The contrast interacts with education such that whites with a college degree are the most likely of all (48%) to say that growth has improved the job market.

The perceived close-to-home benefits of growth seem to have trickled down along similar lines. More East and Middle Tennessee residents (28%) than West Tennessee residents (17%) say growth has improved conditions in their own neighborhood.

But even in Middle Tennessee, growth isn't seen as entirely rosy. Over two-thirds (68%) of Middle Tennesseans, including those living in Nashville and the surrounding counties, complain about growth-related traffic and parking problems. Relatively fewer, but still a majority (51%) of Tennesseans living elsewhere complain about growth's negative effects on traffic and parking.

Tennessee's estimated population grew 5% between 2000 and 2005, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. The increase ranked 21st from the top among the 50 states and the District of

Columbia. Nevada, which topped the list, saw its population grow by 20% over the period. At the bottom of the list, North Dakota's population shrank by 1%, and the District of Columbia's by 4%.

Rutherford, Fayette, and Williamson counties all made the U.S. Census Bureau's list of the 100 fastest-growing counties between July 1, 2004 and July 1, 2005 in terms of housing units. Rutherford ranked 20th from the top. Fayette ranked 40th, and Williamson ranked 84th. The full ranking is available at: <http://www.census.gov/popest/housing/HU-EST2005-top100.html>.

Attitudes towards immigrants not improved by politically correct terminology

Tennesseans think immigration is generally a good thing, but once the terms "undocumented" and "illegal" are introduced, support plummets about equally.

A clear majority (52%) of Tennesseans agree that immigration is good, though about an equal number (53%) think that the current level of immigration should be decreased. Only about one-fifth (21%) opt for the present level, and just 15% hope to see an increase.

In an experiment, however, we asked random thirds of our sample whether "illegal" immigrants, "undocumented" immigrants, or just plain "immigrants" made life "better," "worse," or "about the same" in Tennessee. The word "undocumented" is usually preferred by immigrant groups and immigration-rights advocates. But "undocumented" is also criticized as "politically correct" but not accurate.

Among those asked about immigrants alone, about a third (31%) said they made life better and 27% chose about the "same" – while another third (35%) chose worse.

When the word "illegal" immigrants was introduced, only 14% said they make life better, while 20% chose the same, and a full 60% selected worse.

But "undocumented" immigrants do not fare statistically better. Only 10% say undocumented immigrants make life better, while 19% opt for the same, and 58% choose say they make life worse. We conclude that, for whatever reasons, the terms "illegal" and "undocumented" are equivalent.

Political orientation proved the best predictor of whether immigration should be increased, decreased, or remain the same. Fewer than a third (31%) of liberals, those on the far left, and those refusing to identify their orientation thought immigration should be decreased. But a strong majority (58%) of conservatives, those on the far right, and middle-of-the-roaders think immigration should be decreased.

Education is the best predictor of thinking immigration is generally a good thing, ranging from 67% for those with college degrees or better to 52% for those with some college or trade school and just 36% of those with high school educations or less. Job competition might explain this finding to some degree.

Nashvillians among the least pleased with their local schools

Tennesseans give their local school a C average on an A-F scale. Compared to people elsewhere in the state, metropolitan Nashville-Davidson County residents give their local schools a significantly lower C-minus.

Regarding the state's schools in general, those with at least some college or trade school education are more critical than those with only a high school degree or less. Those with post-secondary education experience give the state's schools a C average, while those with less education give the state's schools a C-plus. Overall, the state's schools get a C average.

Legislature approval up, but still low

Forty percent of Tennesseans approve of the job the Legislature is doing. Although under a majority, the figure represents an upward climb from the 34% approval rating found last spring in the immediate wake of the FBI's "Tennessee Waltz" sting.

In what may be good news for incumbents in the current election, approval is higher (42%) among the state's likeliest voters than among those less likely to vote, only 35% of whom approve. Male likely voters offer more approval than do female likely voters.

Health care No. 1 state problem again

Health care and health insurance continue to be Tennessee's No. 1 problem, named by 19% of our statewide respondents in an off-the-top-of-the head, non-prompted question. In fact, health care emerged as the No. 1 problem in our spring 2004 poll and has remained in first place ever since, though its prominence has declined.

In spring 2004, health care emerged as the leading issue for the first time, with 23% naming health as the issue. And in spring 2005, an unprecedented 34% identified health care as the leading issue as TennCare attracted increasing local and national attention. In spring 2006, the number had settled to 24%.

Education follows health care at 15%, then crime at 7% and the economy at 6%. Despite enormous political and media attention, only 2% named immigration as a major state problem.

Tennessee mood brightens; national mood sour

Things are looking up in Tennessee. This fall's Tennessee barometer stands at a high of 61 out of 100, up from 51 in spring 2006 as well as fall 2005. The national barometer stands, by contrast, at 35. The state and national barometers are based on an index computed from the rating of the governor or president, the perception of the state or national economy, and the direction the state or nation seems to be going in.

Bredesen's rating shades upward

Today, Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval stands at 57%, up insignificantly from 54% last spring but down from 61% in spring 2005.

A strong clue to the governor's continued popularity is found in the fact that more than two-thirds (69%) of strong Democrats and strong Republicans approve of the job he is doing.

Perception of state economy and direction looking up

A full 42% rate Tennessee's economy as good, but only 4% choose excellent, while 41% rate it fair and 12% poor. But those giving the economy a good score rose from 30% in our spring poll.

Republicans and independents (52%) rate the economy as good, compared to 22% of Democrats and other voters.

A majority (53%) are satisfied with the state's direction, up from 57% last spring. But all is not equally well across the state. A full 60% of East and Middle Tennesseans are satisfied with the state's direction, as opposed to only 32% in West Tennessee.

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:

The MTSU Poll State Findings, Fall 2006, p. 7

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
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%
Race:				
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%
Gender:				
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 in rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights.