

Fall 2007 MTSU Poll National Political Report

Summary of key findings

Tennessee shaping up as a 2008 battleground. The 2008 presidential hopefuls may find Tennessee a hard prize to win. Fred Thompson leads, but Hillary Clinton is close behind – and dead-even with national Republican frontrunner Rudy Giuliani. *(Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Personal concerns trump election hot-button issues. The economy, healthcare, taxes, and education most affect Tennesseans personally. Only a minority reported that they are personally affected by immigration, abortion, and gay marriage. *(Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Candidate ratings on issues reflect voter preference. Fred Thompson and Hillary Clinton receive ratings in the 30s or 20s as best able to handle most issues. But Clinton leads Thompson on health care and education, he leads her on taxes, and they tie on the economy. *(Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Little warmth in Tennessee for a Gore presidential bid. Less than a third (29%) of Tennesseans would like to see Al Gore run for president in 2008. *(Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Let Thompson's "Law & Order" reruns roll, most Tennesseans say. Most Tennesseans would not pull the plug on "Law & Order" reruns featuring presidential hopeful Fred Thompson, even if they think the shows will help him attract votes. *(Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Attitudes toward health paradoxical. A majority (51%) say the federal government has a responsibility to guarantee health care for all, but 53% also prefer the current system of private health insurance over a government-run plan. *(Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Education, Medicare top federal spending priorities. Heavy majorities want increased federal dollars for elementary and secondary education, Medicare, mental retardation, and the environment. One-third or fewer want increased spending on highways, welfare, and security and terrorism. *(Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Race makes a big difference on many issues. These include taxes, crime, welfare, perceptions of the economy, legislative approval, approval of the governor and president, and race relations. *(Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Attitudes toward Iraq war remain mostly negative. Over half (54%) of Tennesseans say things are going badly for the U.S. in Iraq. *(Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

President's approval rating still low. Just over a third of Tennesseans approve of George W. Bush's job performance, about the same as last spring. *(Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Details of National Findings, Fall 2007

Executive Summary

Tennessee is a state divided: divided by religion between evangelicals and non-evangelicals, by race between black and white, by politics between liberal and conservative, Republican and Democrat. Perceptions of the health of the state and nation and their leaders differ dramatically. Preferences over candidates and policies are evident – particularly as they affect the availability of health care, the burden of taxes, and services for the disadvantaged. A basic political shift is also evident. Tennesseans are focused more on issues of basic wellbeing – the economy, health, taxes, education – and less concerned with hot button topics such as immigration, abortion, and gay marriage. In the past, health and education have been hallmark Democratic issues, stretching back to the New Deal. By contrast, abortion, gay marriage, and immigration have been Republican issues. In a state that shunned liberal native son Al Gore when he ran for president, Hillary Clinton runs surprising well against conservative native son Fred Thompson and is an even match for Rudy Giuliani. Still, Tennesseans' actual attitudes toward the hot button issues have changed little; those issues are simply not viewed as crucial. Thus, although Tennessee remains substantially a “red” state, it is becoming seemingly less so. The 2008 election may see a dramatic shift in the leadership and direction of the country.

Tennessee shaping up as a 2008 battleground

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

The 2008 presidential hopefuls may find Tennessee a hard prize to win, if current patterns among the state's electorate persist.

Republican and former Tennessee Senator Fred Thompson leads among the people whom Tennesseans say they would like to see win the White House next fall. But Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton isn't all that far behind. And she nearly closes the gap in a hypothetical head-to-head match-up with Thompson.

Asked whom they would most likely support in the 2008 presidential election, about a third (32%) of Tennesseans named Thompson, and a quarter (25%) named Clinton. Nine percent named Democratic Senator Barak Obama, and another 9% named former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani. Four percent chose Republican Senator John McCain.

Ten percent said they didn't know, 9% named one of a dozen other individuals who each attracted under 2%, and the rest either said they probably wouldn't vote or declined to answer.

But in a hypothetical head-to-head contest, Thompson garners 50% to Clinton's 42%, with 4% choosing neither and the rest unsure. Considering the poll's error margin, Thompson's lead over Clinton is small, and the two could even be tied. Pitted against Obama, Thompson wins more handily, drawing 55% and Obama 34%, with 7% choosing neither and the rest unsure.

But nationwide, Thompson's support among Republican voters has plateaued in recent weeks, and he runs below Republican frontrunner Giuliani, making a Clinton-Giuliani contest the likelier scenario. In that match-up, Clinton and Giuliani tie, each backed by 43% of Tennesseans. Eleven percent choose neither, and the rest are unsure.

Political party identification is, of course, the best predictor of whether one would choose Clinton over either Thompson or Giuliani. But behind party preference, race and religion emerge as the next-most-important factors – just as the Spring and Fall 2004 MTSU Polls reported they did in the race between President George W. Bush and Sen. John Kerry.

Our current poll found that, in a head-to-head race between Clinton and Thompson, 81% of minorities choose Clinton, and 13% choose Thompson. Among whites, by contrast, 34% choose Clinton, and 57% choose Thompson. And among whites, Thompson has his largest lead among evangelical Christian males, whereas Clinton leads among females who are not evangelical Christians.

A similar, but more complex, pattern appears in a contest between Clinton and Giuliani. Again, white evangelicals tend to favor Giuliani, the Republican, over Clinton, the Democrat. But gender's influence among white evangelicals disappears – with wealthier white evangelicals gravitating toward Giuliani, and poorer ones either favoring neither or leaning toward Clinton.

Among minorities, meanwhile, geography comes into play, with minorities living in the “doughnut” counties surrounding Nashville and elsewhere outside of Middle Tennessee still supporting Clinton over Giuliani, but less so than minorities living in Metro Nashville.

Meanwhile, McCain, who trails both Giuliani and Thompson nationally, fares perhaps a bit better than Giuliani against Clinton. McCain captures 45% when pitted against Clinton, who draws 42%, but the difference is not statistically significant. Eight percent would vote for neither in a contest between Clinton and McCain, and the rest are unsure.

While Obama clearly lags behind Thompson in the state, he fares better against Giuliani and McCain. Obama nets 36% compared to Giuliani's 44%, with 12% voting for neither and the rest unsure. Against McCain, Obama pulls down 35% to McCain's 44%, with 14% voting for neither and the rest unsure. Again, given the poll's error margin, Obama's actual lag behind both may be minimal.

In sum, a Thompson-Obama contest would be the best-case scenario for Tennessee's Republicans under present conditions. Other pair-ups are more evenly split, and a contest between the two current national frontrunners, Clinton and Giuliani, produces a dead-even tie.

As for the other presidential hopefuls in the race, Ron Paul, Mike Huckabee, John Edwards, Mitt Romney, and Al Gore each draw about 1% when Tennesseans are asked whom they would like to see win the 2008 election. Individuals like Dennis Kucinich, Wesley Clark, Bill Richardson, Sam Brownback, Newt Gingrich, Condoleeza Rice, and even George Bush get one or two mentions that amount to less than 1% each.

In election, hot-button issues trumped by basic personal concerns

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

Asked to judge how much presidential-campaign issues personally affect them, Tennesseans scored the economy, healthcare, taxes, and education highest. Iraq, energy and the environment, crime, and terrorism followed in that order. Immigration fell further down the scale, followed by foreign relations, political division in the country, and race relations.

But the hot-button issues of gay marriage, abortion, and even immigration scored lowest in how much they affect people personally.

For example, fully 74% said they were personally affected a great deal by the economy, and 72% said they were affected a great deal by the state of healthcare. A full 70% responded similarly for taxes and 69% for the state of education. For Iraq, the figure was 62%, compared with 54% for terrorism and 47% for immigration. But Just 34% said they were affected a great deal by abortion and 28% for gay marriage. In fact, 38% said they were not affected at all by the gay marriage issue.

Although immigration, abortion, and gay marriage often dominate campaign headlines, only a minority find themselves affected a great deal by any of them in their personal lives.

Blacks are more affected personally by taxes, education, and race relations than whites. Evangelicals and frequent church attendees say they are affected by gay marriage and abortion. Evangelicals, by contrast, are less likely to be affected by energy issues and the environment. Further, the more one reads a newspaper, the more one is impacted by political divisions in the country.

These findings suggest that the next election might see a seismic shift in campaign issues if items that directly affect most voters overshadow the hot buttons of the past.

Candidate ratings on handling the issues reflects voter preference

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

Asked who can best handle issues that affect them personally the most, respondents' choices tend to mirror their presidential favorites. In presidential preference, Tennesseans chose former Sen. Fred Thomson over Sen. Hillary Clinton by a 32%-25% margin, and the two leading candidates receive similar percentages regarding their ability to best handle many issues. But there are, again, interesting variations reflective of perceived candidate strengths.

The phenomenon is particularly obvious when we consider the top four issues. On the economy, Clinton and Thompson are virtually tied at 30% and 29%, with Giuliani a distant third at 13%. On health care, Clinton leads by 35% over Thompson's 28%. On taxes, Thompson leads Clinton 33% to 26%. And on education she leads him 37% to 26%. These findings are also reflective of the polarization of Tennesseans, who opt by pluralities for a perceived liberal on one hand and a conservative on the other.

But other candidates also have an edge on certain issues. On race relations, Sen. Barak Obama – whose father was African – tops all other candidates at 25%, followed by Thompson at 20% and Clinton at 19%. On handling terrorism, former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani trails Thompson by an insignificant 23% to 28%, with Clinton third at 22% – and the same pattern is visible in handling crime. On most other issues, Giuliani scores about 8-10%. Giuliani, of course, is often credited for his handling of New York City crime as mayor and for his response to 9/11.

For the record, 68% of respondents opposed gay marriage, 54% said abortion should be legal under certain circumstances and 17% under any circumstance, and 51% support a guest worker program for immigrants. In fall 2006, 74% opposed gay marriage; in fall 2005, 55% said abortion should be legal under certain circumstances; and last spring, 50% favored a guest worker program. Thus, there is no real change in these issues.

Little warmth in Tennessee for a Gore presidential bid

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Less than a third (29%) of Tennesseans would like to see Al Gore run for president in 2008. Sixty-three percent say they would not like to see him run, and the rest aren't sure.

A bare majority (51%) of Tennessee's Democrats would like to see Gore throw his hat into the ring, compared to 25% of the state's Independents and just 9% of the state's Republicans.

Nationally, 41% would like to see Gore run, according to an October poll by Gallup. Gore, a Tennessee native, former senator, vice president, and 2000 Democratic presidential nominee, has said he has no plans to enter the race.

Let Thompson's "Law & Order" reruns roll, most Tennesseans say

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Most Tennesseans would not pull the plug on "Law & Order" reruns featuring presidential hopeful Fred Thompson in his role as no-nonsense district attorney Arthur Branch, even if they think playing the role will help him attract votes.

Concerned about violating federal equal access rules governing broadcasters, NBC stopped showing back episodes of the show that feature Thompson after Thompson announced his candidacy. However, Time Warner's TNT Channel, a cable entity, continues to televise them.

But nearly two-thirds (62%) of Tennesseans say the reruns should continue for those who want to watch them, a figure that increases only marginally (67%) among those who say they watch the show frequently.

About one in five Tennesseans (17%) think Thompson will gain "a lot" of votes as a result of his starring role on "Law & Order." Another 40% think he'll pick up "some," while a quarter (24%) say "a few," and 8% say "none." The rest don't know or decline to answer. A quarter (25%) of those who think Thompson will gain "a lot" of votes by running the show think reruns should be taken off the air during the campaign, but 65% say who think he'll gain a lot of votes see no problem with televising the reruns.

And members of one segment of the population appear to want Thompson off the television screen because they simply don't like him. Among Tennesseans who think Thompson will pick up no votes at all from his "Law & Order" appearances, about half (49%) of those who feel "somewhat negative" or "very" negative about Thompson want the reruns pulled, compared with just over a fifth (21%) of those who feel "neutral," "somewhat positive" or "very positive" about Thompson.

Tennesseans' attitudes toward health care system paradoxical

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

A majority (51%) of Tennesseans say the federal government has a responsibility to guarantee health care for all – compared to 69% in a recent nationwide Gallup survey. But a majority (53%) of Tennesseans also prefer the current system of private health insurance over a government-run plan – results close to Gallup's nationwide findings on this issue. There are, however, wide differences among Tennesseans according to political orientation and income level.

Liberals and those on the left (80%) and middle-of-the-roaders (59%) are far more likely to favor federal health guarantees than conservatives (24%). A majority of Democrats (53%) favor government-run insurance over a private insurance, compared to only one-third of independents (33%) and 14 percent of Republicans.

Thus, it seems that most of us like the current system of mixed private control of health care buffered by government programs for those who cannot currently get or afford coverage.

Tennesseans are quite satisfied with their current health care, with 35% rating it excellent and 35% good. Just 15% chose fair and 12% poor.

Income level is intimately related to assessments of one's health care quality. About half (52%) of those with family incomes of \$15,000 or less rate their care as poor or fair, and only 20% say excellent. By contrast, nearly half (49%) of those making \$75,000 and above score their care excellent, while only 11% opt for poor or fair.

Education, Medicare top federal spending priorities

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

Basic issues such as education and health care top Tennesseans' priorities for federal spending. For example, 69% say that more federal dollars should be spent on elementary and secondary education. Other issues where a majority want more spending include Medicare (63%), mental retardation (60%), the environment (59%), foster care (53%), and mental health (53%).

Thus, despite its conservative, red-state reputation, Tennesseans clearly feel that government should increase spending on education for children and youth, the environment, health care, and other services for the aged and for those who cannot help themselves. These figures are similar to those we found in a survey of *state* spending priorities in spring 2003.

At the bottom of the list for increased federal dollars are highway construction (25% spend more), highway maintenance (32%), welfare (33%), and security and terrorism (34%). These issues are followed by law enforcement (40% spend more), universities (43%), mass transit (45%), and community and technical colleges (48%).

Welfare is, however, unpopular among Tennesseans, with 34% reporting that the government is spending too much, and about one-fourth (24%) agree that too much is spent on highway construction.

Political party and political orientation are important for many of these issues. For example, for Medicare spending, a heavy majority (77%) of Democrats and 58% of independents think the government spends too little, but only 41% of Republicans agree. And the same underlying political attitudes are related to spending on education at whatever level, the environment, services for the handicapped and retarded, mental health, and public transportation.

Racial differences are apparent in welfare spending (58% too little for blacks, 21% for whites) and foster care (70% too little for blacks, 32% for whites).

Interestingly, geography plays a major role in support for highways. Fully 45% of West Tennesseans feel that too little federal money is spent on highway construction, while only 17% in East and Middle Tennessee agree. For highway repair, a near majority (49%) of West Tennesseans feel that too little is spent, compared to 34% of East Tennesseans and 23% of Middle Tennesseans.

Race makes big difference in how several issues are perceived

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

As so many of our polling results make clear, there are huge differences between black and white Tennesseans in how they perceive the health of the economy, other issues, and the candidates. Here is a brief summary:

Crime is the No. 1 state problem for blacks, while whites name health care first. A healthy majority (56%) of whites are satisfied with how things are going in the state, compared to 39% of blacks. Blacks rate the state's economy far lower than whites. Legislative approval stands at 44% for whites but 25% for blacks; Bredesen approval splits 63-42%; Bush approval splits 41%-11%.

In the presidential race, 44% of blacks and only 21% of whites opt for Clinton, while 33% of blacks and only 4% of whites opt for Obama. Thompson's support is 38% white and 8% black.

On the issues, blacks and whites are about equally affected by energy and the environment, terrorism, Iraq, gay marriage, abortion, the economy, and health care. But 83% of blacks say they are personally affected a great deal by taxes v. 67% of whites. Further, 72% of blacks say they are affected by crime compared to 52% for whites. And 86% of blacks are highly affected by the educational issues compared to 65% of whites. The gap in race relations is also marked, with 69% of blacks and only 24% of whites saying they are affected a great deal.

Taxes, crime, education, economic wellbeing, foster care, and race relations, those are the fault lines in the state between the races, and they have persisted across time. But on health care and the economy, where blacks and whites rate closer together, neither race seems too optimistic.

The small sample of those selecting other races limits further examination.

Attitudes toward Iraq war remain mostly negative

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Over half (54%) of Tennesseans say things are going "moderately badly" (25%) or "very badly" (29%) for the U.S. in Iraq. Just over a third (36%) say things are going "moderately well," and just 6% say things are going "very well," a combined 42%. The rest aren't sure. The results are nearly identical to those found in the Fall 2004 MTSU Poll.

Nearly two-thirds (62%) disapprove of how President George W. Bush is handling the situation in Iraq. A third (33%) approve, and the rest aren't sure. Last spring, 66% disapproved, 29% approved, 66% disapproved. Similarly, about half (49%) now say sending U.S. troops to Iraq was a mistake, while 46% say it was not a mistake, and the rest aren't sure. Last spring, 51% of Tennesseans called the Iraq war a mistake. These changes are not statistically significant.

Political party is the best predictor of responses to all three questions, with Republicans more positive about the war than Independents are, and much more positive about the war than Democrats are.

President's approval rating still low

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Just over a third (35%) of Tennesseans say they approve of how George W. Bush is handling his job as president. The figure remains essentially unchanged from the 34% approval rating he had in last spring's MTSU Poll, and substantially lower than his 42% approval rating a year before that.

Bush still enjoys a 66% approval rating among the state's Republicans, but the figure stands at 25% among Independents and 10% among Democrats. Behind party identification, his highest approval figures lie among college-educated evangelical Christians (66% approval).

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 Oct. 17-27 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 593 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. 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

MTSU Poll National Political Findings, Fall 2007, p. 10

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	28.7%	16.4%	1.75	30.1%
35-49	29.0%	29.1%	1.00	27.8%
50-64	25.4%	31.9%	0.79	25.4%
65+	16.9%	22.5%	0.75	16.7%
	100.0%	99.9%		100.0%
Race:				
White	83.5%	87.8%	0.95	81.7%
Black	15.2%	6.4%	2.38	16.9%
Other	1.3%	5.7%	0.23	1.4%
	100.0%	99.9%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	46.9%	1.01	46.7%
Female	52.5%	53.1%	0.99	53.3%
	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.