



**Ken Blake**, Ph.D., Director of the MTSU Poll, (615) 210-6187  
**Robert Wyatt**, Ph.D., Director of Communication Research, (615) 477-8389  
**Jason Reineke**, Ph.D., Associate Director of the MTSU Poll, (615) 494-7746

E-mail: [kblake@mtsu.edu](mailto:kblake@mtsu.edu)  
[rwyatt@mtsu.edu](mailto:rwyatt@mtsu.edu)  
[jreineke@mtsu.edu](mailto:jreineke@mtsu.edu)

## MTSU Poll National Report, Fall 2009

**Tennesseans agree on little about health reform other than its importance.** Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Tennesseans consider health reform either very or extremely important. But they agree on little else about the issue. *(Contact Ken Blake)*

**Obama approval drops; plurality identifies as independent.** Forty-six percent of Tennesseans approve of the job Barack Obama is doing. Approval breaks starkly along party lines; plurality of 36 percent identify as independents. *(Contact Jason Reineke)*

**Confidence in Obama administration mixed.** Tennesseans are confident in the administration's ethics and ability to improve the economy. But, a majority expresses little confidence in the ability to reform health care. *(Contact Jason Reineke)*

**Ambivalence on Obama, Republican bipartisanship.** Tennesseans are evenly divided on whether President Barack Obama is doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress. Most say Republicans in Congress are not doing enough. *(Contact Jason Reineke)*

**Rumors about Obama persist among sizeable portions of Tennesseans.** Thirty-four percent say Obama was born in another country, 30 percent say he's Muslim, 35 percent say he'll take people's guns away, 46 percent say he's a socialist. *(Contact Jason Reineke)*

**No. 1 national problem still economy, but on way down.** Forty-six percent name the economy as the No. 1 national problem, a decrease from spring's 66 percent – perhaps indicating rising hope that the recession will abate. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Recession pain rises, particularly among poor; future worry eases.** A full 71 percent say that the recession has hurt them financially, up from spring's 66 percent. But worry about the future economy has decreased to 33 percent from spring's 43 percent. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**National mood steady since spring, partisan divide extreme.** Tennesseans' perception of the national mood has held steady at 28, identical with our spring 2009 poll. Obama voters score the mood at 49 on the 100-point scale; McCain voters, at 5. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

**Confidence in military trumps faith in other major institutions.** The Volunteer State still rates the military far above all other national institutions, with 71 percent expressing a great deal of confidence. Medicine follows at 43, religion, at 36. *(Contact Bob Wyatt)*

## Details of National Findings Fall 2009

**Tennesseans agree on little about health reform other than its importance.**  
*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Tennesseans consider health reform either “very important” (30 percent) or “extremely important” (33 percent). But they agree on little else about the issue.

Just under half (46 percent) say they generally oppose the health care proposals being discussed in Congress. But 36 percent generally support the proposals, and a hefty 17 percent are undecided – enough to give either side an eventual majority. The remaining 1 percent decline to answer.

Similarly, 48 percent support having the government create a new health insurance plan to compete with private insurance plans, but 40 percent oppose such a move, and 11 percent are unsure. Forty-eight percent oppose requiring all Americans to buy health insurance as long as the government helps low income people afford it. But 40 percent favor the idea, and 11 percent are unsure.

As they are at the national level, these attitudes are highly partisan here in Tennessee, with Democrats far more likely than Republicans both to support the current health reform proposals generally and to favor specifics like a government-created health insurance plan and a requirement that all Americans buy health insurance. Independents tend to land between the two and also tend to be more undecided. The table below breaks down support by party on each question:

**Support for health care reform, by party**

| Health reform proposal                   | Democrats | Independents | Republicans |
|--|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| General support of health care proposals | 60 %      | 36 %         | 10 %        |
| Government-created health insurance plan | 65 %      | 54 %         | 19 %        |
| Requiring people to buy health insurance | 59 %      | 33 %         | 30 %        |

About half (49 percent) of the state’s residents say they’ve heard “a lot” about the health care reform bills in Congress, but almost as many (44 percent) say they’ve heard only “a little,” and 5 percent say they’ve heard “Nothing at all.” The rest don’t know or give no answer. Poorer Tennesseans are more likely than wealthier ones to consider health reform important, but they’re less likely than wealthier Tennesseans to say they’ve heard a lot about the proposals in Congress. The finding may point to a “knowledge gap,” a situation in which wealthy individuals acquire public affairs knowledge at a faster rate than poorer individuals, even when the information is more valuable to the poorer individuals.

Tennesseans appear to be relying on a range of sources for information about health reform. State residents said they had learned something useful about health reform from an average of four friends, an average of three news sources, an average of two family members, and an average of two organizations to which they belong.

Forty-seven percent have learned something useful about health reform from two or more relatives. Fifty-five percent have learned something useful from two or more friends. 28 percent

learned something useful from an organization they belong to. 67 percent learned something useful from two or more news sources.

There are a few additional points of agreement, though. Sixty percent of Tennesseans support limiting the amount of money someone can collect if they win a lawsuit after being injured by bad medical care. And a majority of Tennesseans (54 percent) say health reform legislation is either “not very likely” (30 percent) or “not at all likely” (24 percent) to be signed into law by year’s end.

Forty-three percent predict characterize passage as either “somewhat likely” (31 percent) or “very likely” (12 percent). But party differences emerge here, too, with half of Democrats indicating at least some chance of passage, compared to 46 percent of independents and just 27 percent of Republicans.

**Obama approval drops, plurality identifies as independents**  
*(Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)*

Only 46 percent of Tennesseans currently approve of the way President Barack Obama is handling his job, with 48 percent saying that they disapprove. The remaining 6 percent either don’t know how they feel or choose not to answer. Though the difference between approval and disapproval is within the poll’s margin of error, these results show a noteworthy drop-off in approval and increase in disapproval from earlier in the year. The spring poll indicated that 53 percent of Tennesseans approved of Obama and only 27 percent disapproved at that time.

According to pollster.com’s aggregation of national polls as of October 12, 2009, 52 percent of Americans currently approve of the job Obama is doing as President, and 42 percent disapprove.

***“Do you approve or disapprove of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as President?”***

|                   | Approve | Disapprove |
|-------------------|---------|------------|
| Tennessee Overall | 46 %    | 48 %       |
| Nation Overall    | 52 %    | 42 %       |
| Tennessee         |         |            |
| Democratic        | 80 %    | 15 %       |
| Republican        | 12 %    | 84 %       |
| Independent       | 49 %    | 43 %       |

National percentage estimates from Pollster.com

Consistent with results of spring poll, fall approval breaks starkly along party lines: 80 percent of Tennessee’s Democrats approve of Obama, while 84 percent of Republicans disapprove. A plurality of 49 percent independents approve of Obama, while 43 percent disapprove.

Twenty-eight percent of Tennesseans self-identify as Democrats, 32 percent identify themselves as Republicans, and 36 percent say that they are independent. Democratic identification is down since the spring, when 32 percent of Tennesseans said that they were Democrats. Identification as Republican is up since the spring, when 31 percent identified with the GOP. The percentage of independents has also increased slightly from 33 percent in the spring.

Pollster.com's aggregate of national polls as of October 12, 2009 showed that 34 percent of Americans identified as Democrats, 22 percent as Republicans, and 36 percent as independents.

**Confidence in Obama administration mixed**  
(Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)

Tennesseans' confidence in the Obama administration's ethics and abilities to improve the economy, reform health care, and manage foreign policy is mixed.

Fifty-four percent of Tennesseans overall said they were very or somewhat confident in the administration's ethical standards. Thirty-nine percent said they were not too confident or not at all confident in the administration's ethical standards, and the rest said they didn't know how confident they were in the administration's ethical standards or chose not to answer the question.

A narrow majority (51 percent) said they were either somewhat or very confident in the administration's ability to improve the economy, with 47 percent saying they were either not too confident or not at all confident in the administration's ability to do so.

In contrast, 56 percent of Tennesseans said they were not too confident or not very confident in the Obama administration's ability to reform health care, and only 42 percent said they were somewhat or very confident in the administration's ability to reform health care.

Confidence in the administration's ability to manage foreign policy was mixed. Forty-nine percent of Tennesseans said that they were somewhat or very confident in the Obama administration's abilities, and 46 percent said that they were not too confident or not at all confident in the administration's ability to manage U.S. foreign policy.

**Ambivalence on Obama, Republican bipartisanship**  
(Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)

Forty-four percent of Tennesseans say they think President Barack Obama is doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress, but nearly the same number (45 percent) say he's not.

Views on Obama's bipartisanship are starkly partisan. A majority of Democrats (73 percent) say Obama is doing enough to work with Republicans, while a majority of Republicans (56 percent) say Obama is not doing enough. A plurality of independents (47 percent) say that Obama is doing enough to cooperate, while 38 percent say he is not.

On the other hand, clear majorities across party lines believe that Republicans in Congress are not doing enough to work with Obama. Overall, only 25 percent say that Republicans are doing enough to cooperate with Obama, and 62 percent say they are not.

Seventy-nine percent of Democrats say that Republicans aren't doing enough to cooperate, as do 68 percent of independents.

Even among Tennessee's Republicans, only 41 percent say that Republicans in Congress are doing enough to work with Obama, while 42 percent say that the Republicans in Congress are not doing enough to cooperate.

**Rumors about Obama persist among sizeable portions of Tennesseans**

*(Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)*

A notable number of Tennesseans believe some of the most extreme rumors about President Barack Obama.

Thirty-four percent of Tennesseans say it is either probably or definitely true that Obama was born in another country (if this were correct, Obama would be ineligible to serve as President). Fifteen percent say they don't know whether Obama was born in another country or not, and 50 percent say Obama was either probably or definitely not born in another country.

The proportion who believe Obama was born elsewhere is even higher among the state's Republicans, 47 percent of whom say Obama was either probably or definitely not born in this country, while 15 percent say that they don't know, and only 37 percent of Republicans say Obama was probably or definitely not born in another county.

Thirty percent of Tennesseans say it is either probably or definitely true that Obama is a Muslim, with 14 percent saying they don't know and 55 percent saying it is probably or definitely not true. Again, the proportion who think this rumor was true is higher among Republicans than among Tennesseans in general, with 48 percent of Republicans saying it is definitely or probably true, along with 14 percent who say they didn't know, and 38 percent who say it is probably or definitely not true.

Thirty-five percent of Tennesseans think it is either definitely or probably true that Obama will try to take people's guns away, with 13 percent saying they don't know. Fifty-one percent say that this rumor is probably or definitely not true. Fifty-five percent of Republicans think it is definitely or probably true, with 13 percent saying they didn't know, and only 33 percent saying that this is probably or definitely not true.

Among Tennesseans who say that they or someone who lived in their household owns a handgun, 44 percent say it is either definitely or probably true, with 8 percent saying that they don't know, and 47 percent saying that this is either probably or definitely not true.

Forty-six percent of Tennesseans say it is probably or definitely true that Obama is a socialist, with 11 percent saying they don't know. Only 42 percent of Tennesseans think this is probably or definitely not true. Seventy-one percent of the state's Republicans think Obama is probably or definitely a socialist, with 10 percent saying they don't know, and 18 percent saying he is probably or definitely not a socialist.

For all these rumors, there is evidence that those with more education and/or more general knowledge about federal politics are relatively more likely to believe that the rumor is not true.

**No. 1 national problem still the economy, but on way down**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Forty-six percent of Tennesseans name the economy as the No. 1 national problem, though the number selecting this issue is decreasing – indicating a brightening perception of economic trends. In our spring poll, an unprecedented 66 percent named the economy in an open-ended question regarding the nation's top problem, while the percentage in fall 2008 was 53 percent.

All other national issues are hardly on Tennesseans' radar screen, with 8 percent each naming the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or the president as the top issue. Only 12 respondents (3 percent) mentioned healthcare as the top national issue, perhaps because it, too, is regarded as an economic issue.

A vote for Obama for president is the best predictor of viewing the economy as the No. 1 problem, with fully 55 percent selecting the economy, while only 38 percent of McCain voters followed suit.

**Recession pain rises, particularly among poor, but future worry eases a bit**  
*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

A full 71 percent of state residents say that the recession has hurt them financially, up from 66 percent from spring – indicating that the pain may have spread.

Income is the best predictor of being hurt by the recession, with 82 percent of Tennesseans with a family income of \$15,000 or less hurting, followed by 78 percent with incomes between \$15,000 and \$40,000, and 66 percent making more than \$40,000.

About equal percentages say the recession has hurt a great deal (50 percent) or only some (49 percent). Spring figures were 52 percent hurting a great deal and 46 percent only some, a statistically insignificant difference.

However, things seem to be looking up nationally for some Tennesseans: 33 percent say they are very worried about the national economy over the next few years, compared with 43 percent in the spring. Today, 42 percent are somewhat worried, compared to 39 percent last spring, arguably a statistically significant difference.

Presidential vote is the best predictor of worry, with 47 percent of McCain voters but only 18 percent of Obama voters worried a great deal.

When asked about family financial worries over the next few years, just 23 percent are very worried, with 37 percent somewhat worried, 27 percent not too worried, and 13 percent not worried at all. Last spring figures were 24, 41, 23, and 12, statistically similar.

Thus, there is only slight evidence that Tennesseans are marginally hopeful for the nation and even perhaps their family.

Family worry is again best predicted by income, with 44 percent making \$25,000 or less very worried, compared to 24 percent making between \$25,000 and \$40,000 and only 10 percent making more than \$40,000.

**National-mood barometer steady since spring poll, partisan divide extreme**  
*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Even as economists pronounce the recession over, Tennesseans' perception of the national mood has held steady at 28, identical with our spring 2009 poll. Those figures are up from an all-time low of 20 in the fall 2008 survey; in fall 2006, the score was 35.

These results seem to reflect Tennesseans' perception that, although the economy is no better, things have also not deteriorated. This is consistent with economists' acknowledgment that most measures indicating a recovery have yet to have a significant positive effect on the economic lives of most people.

A deep partisan divide is evident in these results. Obama voters (36 percent of the sample) score 49 on the index, while McCain voters (41 percent) score a mere 5.

By party affiliation, Democrats score 49; independents, 30; and Republicans, 3. No wonder the rhetoric surrounding national issues has become so heated.

Our national barometer, derived from one used by the Gallup Poll, is a 100-point index based on presidential approval, perceptions of the state of the economy, and satisfaction with the nation's direction.

When we look at the specific components of the index, we see that 46 percent approve of the job Obama is doing as president. Just 28 percent approve of the direction the nation is going, and 51 percent rate the national economic condition as poor.

**Confidence in military trumps other major institutions; medicine, CIA up from 2005**  
*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

The Volunteer State still supports the call to arms, rating the military far above all other national institutions, with 71 percent expressing a great deal of confidence. The military thus stands in a tier to itself.

In the second tier, medicine follows a distant second, with 43 percent high confidence – followed by organized religion at 36, the CIA at 35, and the Supreme Court at 32.

By contrast, five years ago – at the end of George Bush's first term and during economic recovery from 9/11 – the top two tiers looked this way: the military with an identical 71 percent scoring a great deal of confidence, medicine at 38 (down 5 over this poll), organized religion at 23 (down 13), and the supreme court at an identical 32. The CIA, then suffering from much criticism for 9/11, scored 18 (down 17).

Differences of up to 8 percentage points might be due to chance when two polls of this size are compared. Still our results raise these questions: Could the recession have turned people more toward organized religion? Is the CIA's recovery the result of better publicity?

A third tier features institutions responsible for the economy and politics, including the executive branch of government at 18 percent with great confidence, followed by unions at 17 percent and major companies at 15 percent.

Five years ago, these institutions scored: executive branch 23 (up 5 over this year), unions 16 (down 1), and major companies 12 (down 3).

Finally, the media occupy a tier of their own in the cellar, with 11 percent expressing a great deal of confidence in television and 7 percent in the press. In fall 2005, television stood at 9 (down 2) and the press at 10 (up 3).

In sum, the military retains its preeminent place in confidence among Tennesseans, followed in a second tier by medicine, organized religion, the CIA and the Supreme Court.

Only organized religion and the CIA showed marked increased confidence, while other differences are small and perhaps statistically insignificant.

**Sample and method**

The poll was conducted by telephone Sept. 28 - Oct. 10, 2009, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 716 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of  $\pm 4$  percentage points at the 95 percent 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 estimates 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:

|        |        | Unweighted | Weighted |
|--------|--------|------------|----------|
| Age    | Census | sample     | Sample   |
| 18-34  | 29.5 % | 13.2 %     | 29.3 %   |
| 35-49  | 28.3 % | 26.4 %     | 28.4 %   |
| 50-64  | 24.9 % | 35.0 %     | 25.0 %   |
| 65+    | 17.3 % | 25.4 %     | 17.3 %   |
| Race   |        |            |          |
| White  | 82.1 % | 89.0 %     | 82.4 %   |
| Black  | 15.5 % | 7.6 %      | 15.2 %   |
| Other  | 2.4 %  | 3.4 %      | 2.4 %    |
| Gender |        |            |          |
| Male   | 48.0 % | 47.3 %     | 47.6 %   |
| Female | 52.0 % | 52.7 %     | 52.4 %   |

Small variations in reported percentages (1 percent or less) sometimes result from rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights. Weights also can increase the reported sample size in frequency tables. And, in our summary, where reported percentages do not otherwise total 100 percent, small numbers of those who are undecided or refused to answer may be omitted.