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Summary of Major Findings, Spring 2000

“Bible Belt” may buckle elsewhere. Despite its reputation as the “buckle” of the Bible Belt, Middle Tennessee looks surprisingly like the rest of the country on several common measures of religious belief and practice. Many Middle Tennesseans are religious, but in many ways they are no more religious than the rest of the nation. Nearly nine in 10 consider themselves Christians. But devotion to religious practices varies substantially.

A majority holds beliefs that might be considered “conservative.” About half (53%) of Middle Tennesseans believe non-Christians will be excluded from heaven after death, and 59% say Hell is a real place where non-Christians will live in torment after death. About the same proportion (56%) say they believe God created the universe in six, 24-hour days. Among those who call themselves Christians, a majority (57%) consider themselves “born again.”

Area growth improves quality of life. A substantial majority (55%) says that government and business should still work to increase growth in the area. More area residents (43%) believe that growth pays for itself than believe that growth costs more money than it brings in (33%).

More state spending supported, particularly on education. Respondents express high levels of support for increased spending on education. Eighty-one percent favor the governor’s proposal to raise teacher salaries by 3%. Fully 67% favor additional spending to expand early childhood education, and 62% favor spending more on educational testing.

Opposition to new taxes strong. Sixty-five percent oppose establishing a state income tax, a figure not significantly different from the 62% who opposed the tax in last fall’s MTPoll. However, Governor Sundquist’s “flat tax” plan is marginally more popular than the income tax alone: 37% of respondents favor or strongly favor this plan, while 44% oppose it. Just one-third (34%) of Middle Tennesseans now approve of the way Don Sundquist is handling his job.

Consumer activism alive and well. Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed have been so dissatisfied with a product that they will never purchase it again. About 48% had taken the time to telephone or write an organization to complain about a substandard product or service. And 25% have registered a formal complaint.

Confidence in cops unchanged. Confidence in law enforcement officials is virtually unchanged since the fall 1998 MTPoll. More than one-third (34%) of Middle Tennesseans say they have a great deal of confidence in the police, and 40% say they have some confidence. There are no significant differences between Metro residents and those outside; several recent scandals affecting Metro police do not seem to have shaken general confidence.

Other major issues: Midstate residents grade the news media “C” or “C-.” Support for the death penalty is strong in principle, but many favor suspension until they are certain that innocent people will not be executed.

Details of findings

“Bible Belt” may buckle elsewhere

Despite its reputation as the “buckle” of the Bible Belt, Middle Tennessee looks surprisingly like the rest of the country on several common measures of religious belief and practice. Although many Middle Tennesseans are religious, the region’s population in many ways is no more so than the nation’s population at large.

Nine out of 10 Middle Tennessee residents say they believe in God, and another 7% say they believe in a “universal spirit.” Only about 3% believe in neither, and less than 1% don’t know. More than three in four (84%) of those age 18 and older would describe themselves as “Christian.” By comparison, according to a December 1999 Gallup Poll, 86% of all American adults believe in God, and another 8% believe in a universal spirit.

A full 86% of all Middle Tennesseans report that they pray at least once a week. A 1998 Harris poll reported that 83% of American adults consider themselves to be Christians, a figure similar to ours.

Dedication to other religious practices appears substantially lower, however. More than a third (41%) read the Bible less often than once a week. As for the rest, though, 18% read the Bible weekly, 17% read several times a week, 17% read once a day, and 5% read several times a day.

About 70% belong to a church or other place of worship, but only about a third (32%) attend services weekly. Another third (35%) never or seldom attend worship services, and the remaining third attend either “about once a month” (13%) or “almost every week” (19%). Nationally, a December 1999 Gallup poll estimated that 68% of all Americans belong to a church or other place of worship, and a January 2000 Gallup poll found that 32% of Americans attend worship services weekly.

Encouraging others to become Christians – often called “witnessing” or “evangelizing” – is the least popular practice. Among those who identify themselves as Christians, about a quarter (26%) never witness. Most of the rest (29%) witness less than weekly. The remainder witness once a week (15%), several times a week (12%), once a day (8%), or several times a day (4%).

Concerning two touchstone political issues for the religious right, better than two-thirds (77%) of Middle Tennesseans favor prayer in public schools, and 46% favor outlawing abortion. Just under half (49%) would like to see the religious beliefs of presidential candidates publicly discussed. About a third (33%) think it’s OK for religious leaders to try to influence how people vote in elections, and over half (61%) think the country would be better off if more Christians held office.

Again, though, several national measures are more or less equivalent. In a 1999 CNN/Time poll, 43% of all Americans indicated they were “pro-life,” and Gallup reported the same year that 70% of all Americans favor prayer in the classroom. Meanwhile, 45% of all Americans favor publicly discussing presidential candidates’ religious beliefs, according to an ABC News.com poll in January 2000.

Majority hold beliefs that might be considered “conservative”

Still, a majority of Middle Tennesseans do hold beliefs that might be considered conservative. About half (53%) of Middle Tennesseans believe non-Christians will be excluded from heaven after death, and 59% say Hell is a real place where non-Christians will live in torment after death. About the same proportion (56%) say they believe God created the universe in six, 24-hour days, and 56% say that it's never OK to tell a lie. Not surprisingly, given the region's Baptist influence, more than half (57%) believe one should be baptized only after becoming a Christian.

Despite conservatism on some issues, 64% of Middle Tennesseans believe that women should be ordained as clergy. Even a majority of Southern Baptists – who have historically not ordained women – favor permitting female clergy. But under a third (29%) of all area residents believe that gay men or women should be ordained, and fully 75% oppose gay marriage.

More female (91%) than male (79%) Middle Tennesseans call themselves Christians. Religion also appears closely related to politics, with more Republicans (94%) than Democrats (82%) defining themselves as Christians, a trend that holds true across both genders. Among women, age becomes a factor as well, with women age 35 and older more likely to profess Christianity than younger women. Surprisingly, perhaps, proportions of Christians were nearly identical among Middle Tennesseans living inside (86%) and outside (85%) Metro Nashville-Davidson County.

About a quarter (24%) of Middle Tennesseans identify with the Southern Baptist denomination. Another 14% consider themselves some other kind of Baptist. The Church of Christ and United Methodist denominations are the next two largest Protestant groupings, each attracting 13% of the region's population. Roman Catholics represent roughly 5% of the population.

Among Middle Tennesseans who call themselves Christians, a majority (57%) consider themselves “born again” Christians. Fewer (32%) would describe themselves as “fundamentalist” Christians, and even fewer (26%) see themselves as “evangelical” Christians. Interestingly, about 17% of Christians aren't familiar enough with either of the latter two terms to decide whether the terms describe them. Furthermore, these terms are not mutually exclusive. Some Midstate Christians consider themselves to be all three.

Some insights into the nature of each group, however, can be obtained by comparing the groups on an index of religious devotion formed by summing the poll's measures of church attendance, prayer, Bible reading, and “witnessing.” For example, Christians who consider themselves “born again” are more likely (56%) to be above average on devotion than Christians who don't (31%). Similarly, “fundamentalist” Christians are more likely to be above average on devotion (53%) than Christians who don't consider themselves fundamentalists (38%). However, “Evangelical” Christians appear to be the most devout of all, with 80% ranking above the region's average level of devotion compared to 30% of non-evangelicals.

Also, more females (51%) than males (39%) rank above the average on devotion. Older Middle Tennesseans, as well as Middle Tennesseans who have lived in the state longer, also tend to be more religiously devout.

Religious devotion also is related to Midstate attitudes concerning gender roles, sexual orientation, and marriage and ordination. Middle Tennesseans with an above-average level of devotion are more likely (46%) to oppose ordaining women as clergy than are Middle

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Tennesseans with average-or-below levels of devotion (19%). Devout Middle Tennesseans also are more likely to oppose ordaining gay clergy (84%) compared to those with less devotion (59%), and are more likely to oppose gay marriages (94%) than the less devout (79%).

Recent growth improves quality of life, should be stimulated

Middle Tennesseans are upbeat regarding the impact of recent growth. A substantial majority (55%) say that government and business should work to increase growth in the area, while only 10% want to see the pace decreased. More than one-fourth (28%) say that growth should stay at the same level.

Where a respondent lives in Middle Tennessee does not affect attitudes about stimulating growth. However, those with some college education or more (59%) are significantly more in favor of stimulating growth than those with high school educations or less (46%).

More area residents (43%) believe that growth pays for itself than believe that growth costs more money than it brings in (33%). About one-fifth (20%) say that growth is a break-even proposition. Again, where one lives in Middle Tennessee makes no significant difference in attitudes.

Despite increased congestion and major change, more Middle Tennesseans (46%) say that changes brought about by economic and population growth have made living in Middle Tennessee better. About another third (30%) say that growth has made no difference, and fewer than one in five (18%) say that area life is worse. These figures are significantly more positive than results from the fall 1998 MTPoll, where only 37% thought changes had made life in the region better. Again, where one lives makes not significant difference.

Respondents tend to believe that growth has less of an impact on their own neighborhoods than on the area in general. Just more than one-fourth (28%) said that life in their neighborhood was better, while nearly half (46%) said that it was about the same, and only 12% scored neighborhood life worse.

In terms of neighborhood life, more men (49%) than women (39%) believe that changes have made life better, but, again, there are no significant differences among the various areas of Middle Tennessee.

More state spending supported, particularly on education

Education is still the state's greatest problem, volunteered by 19% in an open-ended question where respondents were not prompted for a specific response. This figure is similar to that in all other MTPolls, beginning in fall 1998. But high taxes were also cited as the No. 2 problem by 17%, an indication of the emergence of the tax debate as a major issue.

Our respondents express high levels of support for increased spending on education. Eighty-one percent favor or strongly favor the governor's proposal to raise teacher salaries by 3%. Fully 67% favor additional spending to expand early childhood education, and 62% favor spending more on additional testing. In September's MTPoll, 69% of respondents felt that the state was not spending enough on elementary and secondary education.

Respondents were not put off by the cost of these programs. Only 11% of those who supported raising teacher salaries said that the \$47 million price tag made them less likely to support the

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raises. Informed of the \$12 million cost of expanding early childhood education, only 9% of supporters said they would be less likely to support the plan. The \$6.5 million cost of additional testing dissuaded 13% of supporters, however, making it the only area of education spending in which the expense of the program might cost it majority support.

Fifty-four percent of Middle Tennesseans also favor the governor's plan to spend more on the court system, to enforce child support, to pay prison costs, and to train state troopers. However, support for this proposal may be somewhat soft. Nearly a quarter (21%) of the plan's supporters said the \$25 million cost would make them less likely to support this spending.

Our respondents were close to evenly split on the proposal to spend more on TennCare, with 38% in favor and 42% opposed, again within the margin of error. Told that the governor's proposal would cost \$132 million, 18% of those who favored it said they would be less likely to support the plan.

One area where Middle Tennesseans oppose new spending is on government employee salaries other than teachers; 52% opposed raising state employee salaries by 3%. Told that the raises would cost the state \$25 million made only 4% of those who opposed the plan more likely to support it. Meanwhile, 20% of those who supported the raises said the cost would make them reconsider.

The average respondent favored about 4 of the 6 new spending proposals we asked about, but how much new spending they favored depended on their attitudes in other areas.

Respondents who favored the income tax were more likely to favor additional spending. Those who strongly favor the income tax supported spending on nearly 5 of 6 proposals, while those who strongly opposed the tax wanted to see new spending in barely 3 of the 6 areas.

Those who believe the state is facing a budget crisis were more likely to see a need for additional spending than were those who did not. Those who believed in the crisis favored new spending on about 4 spending proposals. Those who did believe in the budget crisis favored new spending in only 3.6 of 6 areas.

People aged 18 to 34 supported spending in more areas (4.2) than did those who were 35 or older (3.7), perhaps an indication of greater need of state programs. Among people over 35, those who made less than \$40,000 supported spending in more areas than did those who made more than \$40,000.

However, the majority of respondents preferred cutting spending to raising taxes: 44% would choose to cut spending while 33% would choose to raise taxes. This is comparable to our findings from fall 1999, when 41% favored cutting spending and 33% favored raising taxes.

Opposition to new taxes remains strong, but "flat tax" not most objectionable

Opposition to a personal income tax remains strong in Middle Tennessee. Sixty-five percent of our respondents oppose or strongly oppose establishing such a tax – not significantly different from the 62% who opposed the tax in last fall's MTPoll.

However, Gov. Sundquist's tax plan – which would tax income at 3.75%, reduce the sales tax to 3.75%, and eliminate the sales tax on food – is marginally more popular than the income tax alone: 37% of respondents favor or strongly favor this plan, while 44% oppose it. Though the

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spread between the pros and cons is technically within the margin of error for our poll, the odds are very low that the two factions are equal.

One reason that the governor's plan may garner more support than the income tax alone is that it reduces the sales tax, the least popular existing tax with Middle Tennesseans. Last September, 81% of Middle Tennesseans said they opposed raising the state sales tax. In the current survey, 71% opposed a plan to apply a 1% sales tax to products and services that are not currently subject to the sales tax.

Overall, 59% of Middle Tennesseans believe they would pay more under the Governor's plan. But 83% of Middle Tennesseans who oppose the Governor's tax plan believe that they will pay more in taxes than they do now if the plan goes into effect. Only 33% of those who favor the plan also believe they will pay more.

Sixty percent of those who favor the Governor's tax plan believe that the state is facing a budget crisis, while 62% of those who oppose the plan believe there is no budget crisis. Forty-five percent of Middle Tennesseans believe Tennessee is facing a financial crisis, not significantly different from the 43% who expressed this belief in last fall's MTPoll. This finding also indicates that efforts to convince people of the budget crisis have been unsuccessful.

An alternative tax plan that would include a graduated income tax of 1%, 3% or 5% and eliminate the sales tax on groceries was about as popular as the governor's plan, with 35% of respondents favoring the plan and 48% of respondents opposing it. Although the levels of support and opposition are close to those for the governor's plan, a clear majority opposes the graduated tax proposal.

Taxing cars was as unpopular as extending the sales tax to new products and services: 71% opposed or strongly opposed a \$60 - \$70 per year tax on automobiles.

Sundquist approval plummets; legislative ratings constant

Just one-third (34%) of Middle Tennesseans now approve of the way Don Sundquist is handling his job as governor, and nearly a majority (49%) now disapprove. This represents a drop from 55% approval in the fall 1999 MTPoll, an indication of the toll that the state's tax debate is having on the governor. In the spring 1999 MTPoll – conducted after his re-election – Sundquist's approval was a full 65%.

The Democratic leadership of the state Legislature, by contrast, received a 47% approval rating, up from 43% in the fall. This increase – though statistically insignificant – indicates that the legislature is not suffering the same political fallout as the governor from the volatile tax issue. However, legislative approval is down from 56% in spring 1999. Approval of the legislative leadership was significantly higher among Democrats (64%) than among Republicans (29%) or independents (40%).

Metro mayor Bill Purcell received a 51% positive approval rating among all Middle Tennesseans. Purcell's rating was significantly higher within the eight-county Metropolitan Statistical Area (58%) than in other counties (38%).

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Consumer activism alive and well

Fifty-nine percent of those surveyed have been so dissatisfied with a product that they will never purchase it again. Approximately 48% of those polled had taken the time to telephone or write an organization to complain about a substandard product or service. And 25% have actually registered a formal complain, while seven percent have been involved in a consumer lawsuit.

A majority of Tennesseans would like to see the government play a more active role in consumer protection. Approximately 66% of those polled believe that it is the government's responsibility to protect consumers. Yet, they do not absolve themselves from responsibility. Approximately 56% of those polled said consumers should be responsible for protecting themselves in the marketplace.

In general, consumer activism is positively related to civic activism, income, and education. Whites practice consumer activism more than blacks, and women are more consumer activist-oriented than men.

However, most Middle Tennesseans rarely complain formally. When they do share negative consumer product or service experiences, 92% do so by talking with family and friends.

Individuals making more than \$50,000 were most likely to practice consumer activism, and individuals in the below-\$15,000 and the \$25-40,000 income categories were least likely to be consumer activists. The most dedicated consumers are those who have earned a college degree or more, and the most passive consumers are those with a high school degree or less.

Oddly, consumer activists use most news media less often than passive consumers. Forty percent of those who are least active read the newspaper seven days a week compared to the 33% of those who are most active. Similarly, 45% of the least active consumers watch national television seven days a week compared to 27% to those who are most active. The same pattern emerges for local television viewing.

Middle Tennesseans rarely complain formally about conditions in the workplace. Six percent of those polled have filed a work discrimination/harassment complaint, and only 5% have filed a discrimination lawsuit. Filing a workplace complaint is not positively related to either consumer or civic activism.

Confidence in police unchanged

Confidence in law enforcement officials is virtually unchanged since fall 1998 when that question was last asked. More than one-third (34%) of Middle Tennesseans say they have a great deal of confidence in the police, and 40% say they have some confidence. Whites express far more confidence (37% a "great deal") than blacks (23%). But there are no significant differences between Metro residents and those outside; several recent scandals affecting Metro police do not seem to have shaken general confidence.

Midstate residents give media a "C" to "C-minus"

Middle Tennesseans give the media between "C" and "C-minus" averages on several measures of the media's performance. Asked to rate the media's level of fairness on a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being the highest, Midstate residents gave the media a 2.9. The media earned similar scores for

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its ability to report without bias (2.6), tell the whole story (2.5), report accurately (3.1) and be trustworthy (3.0).

Meanwhile, just under half (47%) think journalists share the same kinds of ethical and personal values as most Americans. More than half (56%) consider journalists more cynical than people working in other professions, and a little less than half (45%) think the press is out of touch with mainstream America. Nearly two-thirds (60%) say media report bad news and ignore good news, although just over a third (39%) say the press ridicules things they believe in.

Males were more likely to complain about the media than females. For example, 73% of men say journalists are unusually cynical, while only 63% of females think so. Similarly, more males (70%) than females (58%) consider the media out of touch with mainstream America. And more males (53%) than females (37%) say the media ridicule things they believe in. No such differences were found between people who do and do not use the news media regularly.

Support for death penalty strong in principle, but a near-majority favors pause

Nearly a majority (47%) of area residents favor suspending the death penalty because so many death row inmates have been proved innocent in other states. A full 44%, however, oppose suspending the death penalty, and 10% are undecided.

When asked how likely it is that an innocent person could be put to death in Tennessee, about one-fifth (21%) say "very likely," and another 51% say "somewhat likely." Only about one-fourth (24%) say that such an execution is "not at all" likely.

Support for the death penalty in principle remains high, however. When asked whether the maximum penalty for murder should be death, life in prison without the possibility of parole, or some lesser penalty, two-thirds (67%) opt for death. More than one-fourth (27%) choose life imprisonment, and the remainder is undecided or select a lesser penalty. These figures show greater support for death than a nationwide Gallup survey conducted in February. There, 52% favored the death penalty, and 37% chose life imprisonment.

Men (78%) in our sample are more supportive of the death penalty than women (58%). And even here, religion plays a role. "Born again" males are more supportive of the death penalty (87%) than other men (72%), and Baptist women (66%) are more supportive than other women (51%).

In an alternately worded question, some of our respondents were asked simply whether they favor the death penalty for murder. There, more than two-thirds (67%) also say yes, about one-fifth (18%) say no, and 15% are undecided – results similar to the question where life without parole is given as an alternative.

In the fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll, nearly three-fourths (71%) of Middle Tennesseans supported the death penalty for people convicted of murder, while about one-fourth (24%) were opposed. Today, there are more undecideds, although comparisons between the two polls are within the statistical margin of error. This means that any differences could be the result of chance variations in sampling.

In the February Gallup Poll, two-thirds (66%) said they supported the death penalty for murder, while more than one-fourth (28%) said no on this version of the question. This means that, on the yes/no version, Middle Tennesseans are somewhat more supportive of capital punishment

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than Americans at large. The February Gallup figures, incidentally, showed the lowest nationwide support for the death penalty since the early 1980s.

In the Middle Tennessee survey, women are more likely than men to believe that innocent persons could be executed. For example, one-third (33%) of men consider the execution of innocent people to be very unlikely, but only one-fifth of women (20%) agree.

Concerning suspending capital punishment because innocent people may be executed, the best predictor is political orientation. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of those who identify themselves as liberal favor suspension, while only 45% of middle-of-the-roaders favor suspension, and only 31% of conservatives. People on the far right, however, are nearly as likely (60%) as liberals to support suspending capital punishment.

Sample and Method

The poll was conducted by telephone from Feb. 27 to March 17, 2000, by the Office of Communication Research at Middle Tennessee State University. Communication Research faculty were responsible for the questionnaire, sampling method, and results. Trained students interviewed 486 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the 39 counties making up Middle Tennessee. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4.5 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 accurate within 4.5 percentage points 95 out of 100 times, though the divergence is often less. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups. Other factors, such as question wording also affect the outcome of a survey.

The sample varied somewhat from estimates for age, race, and gender obtained from 1998 U.S. Census Bureau figures for Middle Tennessee. This is because certain demographic groups are difficult to contact. Our data were thus weighted to more closely match Census estimates, yielding a total of 470 cases for statistical purposes. Here are relevant percentages:

Demographic	Population	Sample	Weight	Weighted Sample
Age 18-34	30.49%	31.20%	0.98	30.80%
Age 35-49	32.88%	36.80%	0.89	33.20%
Age 50-64	20.86%	17.70%	1.18	20.50%
Age 65 up	15.77%	14.30%	1.10	15.60%
Male	47.66%	43.80%	1.09	47.00%
Female	52.34%	56.20%	0.93	53.00%
White	87.23%	88.00%	0.99	87.70%
Black	11.48%	7.70%	1.49	10.90%
Other	1.30%	4.40%	0.29	1.40%

The Middle Tennessee Poll, begun in 1998, is a twice-a-year assessment of attitudes in Middle Tennessee. MTSU's College of Mass Communication, School of Journalism, and John Seigenthaler Chair of First Amendment Studies provide funding.