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## Major Statewide Findings, Spring 2001

**Election forecast goof may have harmed media's reputation for impartiality.** The great majority of Tennesseans say they recall that the network television news programs mistakenly predicted on election night that Al Gore would win the state of Florida. Those who say they recall the mistake are significantly more critical of the media's impartiality than those who don't.

**Most Tennesseans support lottery, but major population segments have doubts.** While nearly two-thirds (65%) of Tennesseans favor creating a state lottery, support lags appreciably among the elderly, the well educated, the politically conservative and the religiously devout.

**Education still No. 1 problem; near majority believes in budget crisis.** Education continued its tradition at the top of concerns voiced by Tennessee citizens, with more than one in four (29%) naming education as the top problem. Nearly half (47%) now believe that Tennessee is facing a real budget crisis, but a solid 41% still are not convinced.

**Residents worried about national economy, optimistic about personal finances.** More than two out of every three Tennesseans think economic conditions in the country are getting worse. However, only about a third expect to be personally worse off financially next year.

**Health quality, insurance strongly linked to income, education.** More than half (55%) of Tennessee residents report that they have either excellent or very good health. But income was strongly related to health quality, with nearly three quarters (72%) of those with incomes of \$40,000 and more reporting excellent or good health. Approximately 10% of Tennesseans have no health insurance, a figure again linked to income.

**Tennesseans tilt toward gun control, but are highly polarized.** A near majority (47%) believes that the government has not gone far enough to control gun ownership, while 39% believe the government has gone too far. The issue is highly polarized: 44% strongly believe the government has not gone far enough, while 37% strongly feel the government has gone too far. Although divided on the issue of gun control, 89% agree that gun-safety courses should be required. A minority of gun owners belongs to NRA, but more members keep loaded guns.

**Regionalism weak compared to state, national identity, but still Big Orange Country.** Most Tennesseans (66%) reject the idea that East, Middle and West Tennessee are different enough to be three separate states. When asked to choose between Southern and American identities, 83% choose American. More than half (54%) identify the University of Tennessee Volunteers as the state's football team, but over a third (35%) pick the Tennessee Titans. There are strong regional differences, with more than half of Middle Tennesseans (52%) favoring the Titans.

**Other findings:** Public divided sharply on election's outcome, Supreme Court's ruling. Bush approval high; Sundquist lags legislature. Only one-third smoke; non-smokers say they are healthier. Most discount discrimination as a major factor in black-white difference.

## Details of Findings

### **Election forecast goof may have harmed media's reputation for impartiality**

The great majority of Tennesseans (71%) say they recall that the network television news programs mistakenly predicted on election night that Al Gore would win the state of Florida. The rest say they either didn't know or knew but had forgotten (29%). Tennesseans with higher incomes are more likely to remember the mistake than those with lower incomes. Seventy-three percent of those earning \$25,000 to \$40,000, 74% of those earning \$41,000 to \$50,000, and 81% of those earning more than \$50,000 report remembering the mistake compared to 62% of those earning \$15,000 to \$24,000 and 56% of those earning less than \$15,000. Higher levels of education are also associated with recollection of the gaff. Among those with college degrees, 82% remember compared to 75% of those with only some college or trade education and 60% of those with a high school degree or less. There are no statistically significant differences in recollection rates among liberals (72%), moderates (75%), and conservatives (71%). Men (75%) and women (68%) also recall the mistake in statistically equivalent proportions.

Interestingly, those who say they recall the mistake are no more critical of the media's fairness, comprehensiveness, accuracy, or trustworthiness than those who say they do not recall the mistake. But when rating the media's impartiality, those who remember the error express substantially more criticism of the media than those who do not remember the error. The finding may indicate that, at least among Tennesseans, the networks' bungling of the Florida election forecast harmed the media's reputation for objectivity more than it harmed the media's reputation for fairness, comprehensiveness, accuracy, or trustworthiness.

At least one alternative explanation is possible, though. Research suggests that people with more education and higher incomes generally tend to be more critical of the media than people with less education and lower incomes. These relationships occur partly because better-educated, wealthier people tend to have more direct dealings with the media and partly because such people have a more sophisticated understanding of the media's role in society. These people also pay closer attention to the news and thus would be more likely to recall the forecast mishap. In short, it may be that instead of recollections of the mistake causing a decline in ratings of the media's objectivity, higher levels of education and income – for even more basic reasons – may cause both criticism of the media's objectivity and recollection of the error.

### **Most Tennesseans support lottery, but major segments have reservations**

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Tennessee residents say they either favor (26%) or strongly favor (39%) creating a state lottery. About 10% say they aren't sure about a lottery, while 15% oppose a lottery, and 10% strongly oppose a lottery.

These broad percentages, though, hide significant fault lines in lottery support. For example, proportionally few college graduates (59%) favor a lottery than people with only some trade or college training (72%) or nothing more than a high school education (63%). Differences are even more striking elsewhere. Seventy-eight percent of Tennesseans age 18 to 34 favor a lottery, compared to 61% of those 35 to 49, 59% of those 50 to 64, and 51% of those 65 and older. If religious devotion is defined as frequency of attending church, reading the Bible, praying, and evangelizing, then 81% of Tennesseans with average or below levels of religious devotion support a lottery compared to only about half (50%) of those with above-average levels of religious devotion. Similarly, proportions of lottery supporters among self-described liberals

(75%) and moderates (72%) are substantially greater than the proportion of lottery supporters among conservatives (53%).

It should be noted, though, that lottery supporters equal lottery opponents within one of these subgroups – the unusually religiously devout – and outnumber lottery opponents within all of the rest. Meanwhile, support for a lottery appears constant across divisions of income, gender, race, and geography.

### **Education still No. 1 problem; near majority believes in budget crisis**

Education continued its tradition at the top of concerns voiced by Tennessee citizens, with more than one in four (29%) naming education as the top problem in an open-ended question. Further, those with incomes above \$50,000 are more likely to name education (37%) than those with lower incomes (about 25%). In a distant second among major problems were high taxes (15%), a poor economy (13%), and government inefficiency (11%) – all concerns related to the state's current economic and budgetary problems. Nearly half (47%) of our respondents now believe that Tennessee is facing a real budget crisis, but a solid 4 in 10 (41%) still are not convinced, while 12% say that they do not know. Interestingly, blacks (66%) are more likely to believe in the budget crisis than whites (43%). Whites (48%) with family incomes of \$50,000 and more are also more likely to believe in the budget crisis than most other whites.

### **State residents worried about national economy, optimistic about personal finances**

More than two out of every three Tennesseans (71%) think economic conditions in the country are getting worse. However, only about a third (34%) expect to be personally worse off financially next year. The figures indicate Tennesseans' perceptions of the economy are fairly consistent with the economic perceptions of Americans at large. A February 2001 Gallup poll found that Americans' "Future Economic Expectations Index," defined as the percent predicting economic improvement minus the percent predicting economic worsening, was -43 for the national economy but 42 for their personal financial situations ("Gallup Poll Topics: A-Z," <http://www.gallup.com/poll/indicators/indpersonal.asp>). The corresponding figures for the Tennesseans surveyed were -42 and 31, respectively.

Most state residents either see their personal fortunes improving despite a faltering economy (37%) or see both their personal economic outlooks and the nation's economy heading for trouble (32%). The next largest group expresses optimism about both their personal finances and the national economy (27%), and a mere 5% foresee improvement in the nation's economy but difficulties in their own financial situation.

Nearly half (40%) of Tennesseans age 18 to 34 are upbeat about the national economy's future. Older state residents are significantly more wary, with only 25% of those age 35 to 49 and age 50 to 64 predicting better times ahead for the nation. Among Tennesseans older than 65, only one in five (20%) foresee economic improvement nationally. Roughly the same patterns holds true for personal finances, but with more optimism expressed across the board. Nearly 80% of residents age 18 to 34 expect to be better off financially in the next year, compared to 70% of those age 35 to 49, 60% of those age 50 to 64, and 33% of those 65 and older.

Education makes a marginal difference on concern about the national economy. Seventy-six percent of residents with a high school diploma or less perceive a worsening of the national economy, compared to 36% of those with some college or trade education and 30% of those with a college degree. The differences are equally pronounced on the personal level, where

44% of those with a high school education or less consider their economic prospects bleak compared to 27% of those with some college or trade education and 28% of those with a college degree.

Seventy-two percent of liberals and 74% of moderates in the sample are concerned about the future of the national economy compared to 65% of the conservatives, a difference that is not statistically significant. On the personal level, however, a significantly smaller proportion of conservatives (23%) are worried about their financial prospects than moderates (40%) and liberals (42%). Similarly, men (70%) and women (72%) are more or less equally concerned about the national economy, but in the area of personal financial situations, marginally more women (39%) than men (29%) see reason to worry.

### **Health quality, insurance strongly linked to income, education**

More than half (55%) of Tennessee residents report that they have either excellent or very good health. But income was strongly related to health quality, with nearly three quarters (72%) of those with incomes of \$40,000 and more reporting excellent or good health, compare with just over half (55%) in the \$25,000-\$39,999 bracket and only 42% of those with lower incomes.

Education was also strongly related to perceived health quality. Approximately 68% of Tennesseans with a college degree or more reported having either excellent or very good health. And almost a quarter of Tennesseans with a high school degree or less reported having either fair or poor health.

Approximately 10% of Tennesseans have no health insurance, a figure again linked to income (4% for those making more than \$50,000; 16% for those making less than \$25,000). On average, more than 60% of Tennesseans get their health insurance through their employer, and well over 80% of them are either very satisfied or somewhat satisfied with their health insurance. Of the Tennesseans who do have health insurance, more than 10% have had problems with their provider during the past 12 month period.

In general, most Tennesseans go to the doctor 1 to 5 times a year regardless of the quality of their health. Interestingly, increased number of doctor visits is negatively related to doctor satisfaction. About 12% of our respondents said that at some point during the past 12 months they failed to get medical treatment when it was needed. A third (33%) cited lack of money or insurance as the primary reason for not getting needed medical treatment.

### **Tennesseans tilt toward gun control but are highly polarized**

A near majority of Tennesseans (47%) believes that the government has not gone far enough to control gun ownership, while 39% believe the government has gone too far, and 15% say they don't know how to feel. The issue is highly polarized, with 81% of those with opinions expressing a strong opinion one way or the other: 44% strongly believe the government has not gone far enough, while 37% strongly feel the government has gone too far. East Tennesseans are slightly more likely to oppose additional gun ownership controls than are people living in Middle or West Tennessee. Our survey was completed before the recent school shooting in San Diego.

Most of those who believe that government gun control has gone too far cite the constitutional right to bear arms as the reason. About one in five (20%) give this reason, making it nearly three times as popular as the next most common reason: wanting to own a firearm for protection

(cited by 8% of those who oppose further gun control). Those who favor additional regulation most frequently said guns were too easy to obtain, with 18% offering this reason. The second most popular reason was a concern about high levels of crime and/or violence, given by 7% of those who favor additional regulation.

Although Tennesseans are strongly divided on the issue of gun control itself, we find overwhelming support for requiring gun owners to take a gun-safety training course. Overall, 89% of our respondents agreed that this should be a requirement, and 81% of those who strongly believe that the government has gone too far in regulating gun ownership still supported requiring safety training of owners. Currently, most of those who keep a weapon in their homes were taught how to use a gun by another family member (63%). Another 15% learned how to use a gun in some type of formal course. Nearly the same percentage (14%) claim to be self-taught.

Virtually all Tennesseans have had some experience with guns. A full 90% of Tennesseans either currently have a gun in their homes or have handled a gun at some time in their lives. Nearly 80% report having fired a gun at some point in their lives, and 73% report that their parents own or owned firearms. Forty-three% of Tennesseans say that either they themselves or someone close to them has been shot.

Over half of all households in Tennessee (53%) contain at least one firearm. Of those households that have firearms, 75% contain more than one, and more than half contain more than two. Half of those who have guns in their homes own at least one pistol (54%), half own at least one shotgun (51 percent) and half own at least one rifle (57%). Gun owners in East Tennessee are slightly more likely to own pistols than are those living in West Tennessee, and Middle Tennesseans are less likely to own shotguns than those living in either East or West Tennessee. Nearly 60% of those who keep a gun in their homes say that their weapons are not currently loaded, and only 4% report that their guns have ever been fired accidentally.

Nearly half of Tennesseans who keep guns in their homes say the main reason they own a firearm is for protection (49%), and another 40% say they use their gun mainly for hunting. While protection is the main reason cited by a majority of our respondents in Middle and East Tennessee (51% and 54% respectively), a majority of West Tennesseans say they mainly own guns for hunting (57%). Ninety percent of those who keep a gun for protection have other protective devices as well, such as dogs, alarms, or motion-sensitive lights.

However, those who say they own guns for protection are not much more likely than the rest of our respondents to have been the victims of a gun crime. Twenty-two percent of those who own guns for protection say they have been victims of a gun crime, compared to 20% of the overall sample. Seventeen percent of those who say they own a gun for protection report that they have used a gun to defend themselves, while 12% of the overall sample say they have done so. Nearly 90% of those who keep guns for protection say that they would be capable of using them if confronted by an intruder in their homes, but so would 78% of our overall sample.

Not all Tennesseans think gun ownership enhances safety. About 54% feel strongly that gun ownership increases safety by allowing law-abiding citizens to protect themselves. However, 31% strongly feel that gun ownership reduces safety by increasing the chances for accidental misuse. As in the case of gun control, opinion on this issue is highly polarized, with only 16% of respondents saying that they did not have strong feelings on the issue.

### **Minority of gun owners belong to NRA, but more NRA members keep loaded guns**

Although gun ownership is quite common in Tennessee, only about 14% of our respondents are members of the National Rifle Association. NRA members do differ from other Tennesseans in some of their attitudes about guns. NRA members own more firearms than other gun owners in Tennessee. Fifty-five percent of Tennessee gun owners who do not belong to the NRA own one or two guns, while 79% of NRA members in Tennessee own more than two guns. The guns of NRA members are also more likely to be loaded: 60% of NRA members keep their firearms loaded, compared to 32% of other Tennessee gun owners. However, NRA members are not significantly more likely to report that their guns have been fired accidentally.

NRA members are more likely than other Tennesseans to have been a victim of a crime involving a gun and to have used a gun to defend themselves. Almost 30% of NRA members report having been threatened by a gun in a crime, compared to 18% of other Tennesseans. One fourth (25%) of NRA members report having used a gun to defend themselves, while only 10% of other Tennesseans report having done so.

Unsurprisingly, NRA members are far more likely than other Tennesseans to feel that the government has gone too far in controlling gun ownership. Seventy-six percent of NRA members feel this way, compared to 47% of gun owners who are not NRA members and 13% of non-owners. They also feel strongly that gun ownership increases safety, with 85% embracing this point of view, compared to 68% of other gun owners and 27% of non-owners. However, even NRA members strongly support required gun safety training courses for owners, with 87% saying this should be required.

### **Regionalism weak compared to state, national identities, but still Big Orange Country**

Most Tennesseans (66%) reject the idea that East, Middle and West Tennessee are different enough to be thought of as three separate states, indicating that perceptions of regional differences have all but disappeared. However, substantially more West Tennesseans (27%) than either East (19%) or Middle (14%) Tennesseans say the three regions are different enough to be in different states. The longer people have lived in Tennessee, the more likely they are to think of Tennessee as a unified state.

A heavy majority (87%) consider themselves to be Tennesseans, and almost as many (80%) consider themselves Southerners. But when asked to choose between Southern and American identities, 83% choose American, with only 12% selecting Southern – indicating less than a robust identification with so-called Rebel values. Statistically equivalent portions of Tennessee Whites (82%) and Blacks (73%) identify themselves as Southerners. Furthermore, there are no significant differences among the various regions of the state.

Just more than one in five (22%) Tennesseans consider some place other than where they now live as home. More than a quarter (26%) of Middle Tennesseans, 23% of West Tennesseans, and only 18% of East Tennesseans think of some other place as home, indicating significant regional differences. Blacks (40%), when compared with Whites (19%), were almost twice as likely to call some other place home.

More than half of our respondents (54%) identify the University of Tennessee Volunteers as the state's football team, while just more than a third (35%) pick the Tennessee Titans. But there are strong regional differences, with more than half of those in Middle Tennessee (52%) giving the nod to the Titans, compared with less than one-fourth (19%) in the rest of the state.

### **Public divided sharply on election's outcome, Supreme Court's ruling**

One month into the new Bush administration, Tennesseans remain sharply divided about the outcome of election 2000. Ninety-one percent of Tennessee Republicans who were asked what the outcome of the election should have been said that Bush should have become president, but nearly 80% of Tennessee Democrats still believed that Al Gore should have been made president. Self-identified Independents gave the race to Bush by a 54% to 38% margin. Overall, the presidential post-game remained tight. Forty-nine percent of Tennesseans said they felt Bush should have been made president, while 43% said Gore should have been sworn in. Three months after the election, our poll results on who should have been made president remain too close to call.

Public opinion in Tennessee is also deeply divided over the motivation behind the Supreme Court decision that ultimately determined the election outcome. Asked to place the Court's decision on a five-point scale running from entirely legal (1) to entirely political (5), 33% of our sample said they thought the decision was entirely political, while 24% said that it was entirely legal. Importantly, 57% of our respondents placed themselves at the extreme ends of the scale. Only 39% placed themselves somewhere in the middle and in effect said they thought the Court's motives were mixed.

Those in Tennessee who thought Bush should have won the election were much more likely to think that the Court's decision was primarily legal (average rating 2.24), while those who felt Gore should have won were more likely to think that the Court's decision was primarily political (average rating 4.14). Republicans saw the decision as legal (average rating 2.11) while Democrats saw it as political (average rating 4.19). Liberals were also more likely to view the decision as political (average rating 3.78) and conservatives more likely to see it as legal (average rating 2.45), an effect not as strong as party identification.

Our poll results reveal that the Supreme Court's decision may indeed have consequences for the public's confidence in the institution. People who thought the decision was more political than legal had less confidence in the Supreme Court as an institution. However, we do not find evidence of declining confidence in the Supreme Court since we last asked Middle Tennesseans about this issue in the fall of 1999.

### **Bush approval high; Sundquist lags legislature**

A majority of Tennesseans (55%) approve of the job George W. Bush is doing as President, but nearly a quarter (23%) disapprove, and another fourth (23%) say they don't know whether they approve. The Bush approval rating is polarized, however, by party loyalty, with 93% of identified Republicans approving, as opposed to 50% of independents and 24% of Democrats. Only 40% of respondents approve of the job Gov. Don Sundquist is doing, while another 40% disapprove, and a significant 20% are undecided. For Sundquist, half of Republicans approve, as opposed to 36% of Democrats and independents. Approval of the state Legislature is somewhat higher than approval of the governor, with 45% approving, 27% disapproving, and a full 28% remaining undecided.

### **Only one-third smoke; non-smokers say they are healthier**

Less than one third (30%) of our respondents are smokers. Under half of smokers (46%) reported having excellent or good health, as compared to 59% of non-smokers. Smokers (16%) were also more likely than non-smokers (11%) to have seen a doctor 10 or more times during

the past 12 months. Additionally, 17% of smokers, as compared to 7% of non-smokers, reported having no health insurance.

**Most discount discrimination as a major factor in black-white difference**

Most Tennesseans (69%) do not believe that discrimination is a major factor in explaining why blacks, on average, have worse jobs, income and housing than whites. A surprising percentage of Tennesseans (9%) believe that the economic disparity between blacks and whites is, in fact, a result of blacks having less in-born ability.

Nearly two-thirds (61%) do not think educational differences provide an explanation for the disparity. But many Tennesseans (45%) believe that motivation is a key to the economic disparity that exists between blacks and whites.

A surprising picture emerges when race is considered. Only 15% of white Tennesseans believe discrimination is a factor in explaining the economic disparity between blacks and whites, compared to 42% of blacks. Also surprising is the finding that though only 9% of Tennesseans believe that differences are due to inborn ability, significantly more blacks (13%) than whites (8%) agree.

**Sample and Method**

The poll was conducted by telephone from Feb. 19 to March 2, 2001, 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 622 people age 18 or older chosen at random from across Tennessee. The poll has an estimated error margin of ±4% at the 95% level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the population accurate within four 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 and race proportions derived from 1999 U.S. Census Bureau figures for Tennessee residents age 18 and older. This is because certain demographic groups are difficult to contact. Our data were thus weighted to more closely match Census estimates. Here are relevant weights and percentages:

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
<b>Age:</b>				
<b>18-34</b>	31.3%	33.7%	0.93	32.3%
<b>35-49</b>	31.4%	28.5%	1.10	31.4%
<b>50-64</b>	20.9%	22.7%	0.92	20.0%
<b>65+</b>	16.4%	15.1%	1.09	16.3%
<b>Race:</b>				
<b>White</b>	82.9%	87.0%	0.95	82.9%
<b>Black</b>	14.9%	7.8%	1.92	14.9%
<b>Other</b>	2.1%	5.2%	0.41	2.2%

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