

Robert Wyatt, *Director*, (615) 898-2335  
Ken Blake, *Operations Manager*, (615) 898-2226  
Jill Edy, *Planning Manager*, (615) 904-8552  
Teresa Mastin, *Public Affairs Manager*, (615) 904-8239

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

## Summary of Major Findings, Spring 2002

**Tennesseans may be willing to deal on a state income tax.** Opposition to the general idea of a state income tax remains strong. But support exceeds opposition if passing an income tax is tied to cutting the state sales tax, and the idea of spending income tax revenue solely on education provokes majority support for an income tax.

**Flat income tax preferred over graduated income tax.** If there has to be an income tax, make it a flat one, state residents say.

**Belief in a state fiscal crisis growing.** Better than two-thirds of state residents believe the state of Tennessee faces a fiscal crisis. The proportion has risen substantially from the 59 percent observed during the Fall 2001 Middle Tennessee Poll in October. A year ago, the proportion was 47 percent.

**Confidence rises in national economy, personal finances.** Tennesseans' confidence in both the national economy and their personal financial outlook has rebounded somewhat since the weeks following the Sept. 11 attacks. Appreciable differences appear, though, among people of different political parties, ages, and education levels.

**Support high for military strikes in Afghanistan, elsewhere.** Tennesseans in general remain highly supportive of U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan. They also support, although not quite as strongly, U.S.-led military attacks on other countries suspected of harboring terrorists. But race and political party loyalty are important factors.

**State residents split over necessity of capturing Osama bin Laden.** Opinion divides evenly across the state on whether capturing al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is a prerequisite for declaring the military strikes in Afghanistan a success. Forty-six percent of the state's residents say bin Laden's capture is critical to the strikes' success, and 46 percent say it isn't.

**Support running higher than usual for some free speech rights.** Support is running higher than usual in the state for some of the news media's free speech rights – namely journalists' right to publish violent images, report classified information, and criticize politicians.

**Television networks still drawing praise for coverage of Sept. 11 attacks.** The state's residents continue to hold relatively favorable opinions about how national television news networks covered the Sept. 11 attacks, although somewhat less so than in October.

**“God bless America” means ... lots of things.** The phrase “God bless America” has no single meaning for Tennesseans despite its frequent use in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. Most say the phrase has a patriotic meaning, but many say it has a religious meaning, and about as many others say it means something else entirely. Some say they have no idea what it means.

## **Details of Major Findings**

### **Tennesseans may be willing to deal on a state income tax**

Opposition to the general idea of a state income tax remains strong. But support exceeds opposition if passing an income tax is tied to reductions in the state sales tax. Furthermore, the idea of spending income tax revenue solely on education provokes majority support for an income tax.

When asked, "In general, would you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose establishing a state personal income tax, or aren't you sure?" only about one in four state residents – 23 percent – express support. A clear majority – 58 percent – express opposition, and a notable 19 percent say they aren't sure or don't know. The proportions are basically unchanged from those uncovered during the Fall 2001 Middle Tennessee Poll in October.

However, when subsequently asked about enacting a state income tax "if it meant ending the sales tax on groceries and lowering the sales tax on other items," the proportion of supporters rises to 46 percent, and the proportion of opponents slides to 38 percent. The remaining 16 percent express uncertainty.

The shift is even more dramatic when individuals are asked about enacting a state income tax "if the proceeds were to be used for education." In that case, a 52 percent majority of state residents indicate support for an income tax. Opposition holds at 39 percent, and the proportion of those expressing uncertainty drops to 9 percent. The sequence of the questions linking an income tax to a sales tax cut and to support for education was varied randomly to help control for order effects.

Beneath the surface of these patterns, public opinion toward an income tax appears highly complex. On the question of an income tax in general, for example, the strongest support for an income tax appears among college-educated individuals, especially those from the left and middle of the political spectrum. Conversely, support is weakest among less-educated individuals, especially those from the political right.

If linked to a cut in the sales tax, meanwhile, a state income tax attracts majority support among Tennesseans age 18 to 34. But opposition outweighs support among older Tennesseans, especially those who have no minor children living at home.

A sales tax set up to fund education also enjoys majority support among state residents age 18 to 34, particularly those who are female. Among older Tennesseans, opinion breaks cleanly along party identification lines, with Democrats generally expressing more support than Republicans.

### **Flat income tax preferred over graduated income tax**

If there has to be an income tax, make it a flat one, state residents say. Asked whether an income tax, if enacted, should "charge everyone the same amount per dollar of income or charge wealthier people more per dollar of income than poorer people," 59 percent of Tennesseans prefer a system that charges everyone the same rate regardless of income – in short, a flat tax. Only 36 percent opt for a graduated income tax that would charge wealthier

people more per dollar of income than poorer people. Five percent aren't sure one way or the other.

Surprisingly, perhaps, preference for a flat tax is consistent across all income levels measured in the poll. Support for a flat tax also varies little across most other demographic groups considered. Appreciable differences do appear along political lines, with politically right Tennesseans – particularly males age 35 and older – generally expressing the most support for a flat tax. Even among those from the political center and left, though, a flat tax is the majority's choice.

### **Belief in a state fiscal crisis growing**

Better than two-thirds - 67 percent - of state residents believe the state of Tennessee faces a fiscal crisis. The proportion has risen substantially from the 59 percent observed during the Fall 2001 Middle Tennessee Poll in October. A year ago, the proportion was 47 percent.

Belief in a fiscal crisis is strongest among state residents who pay closer attention to television news, especially those who are well educated. Interestingly, majority belief in a fiscal crisis cuts across attitudes toward enacting a state income tax. Eighty-two percent of Tennesseans who favor an income tax assert that the state faces a financial crisis. But so do 60 percent of income tax opponents and 64 percent of those undecided about an income tax.

### **Confidence rises in national economy, personal finances**

Tennesseans' confidence in the national economy has rebounded somewhat since the weeks following the Sept. 11 attacks. Nearly half – 47 percent – of the state's residents say the national economy is getting better. In October's Middle Tennessee Poll, the figure was only 32 percent. On the flip side, 41 percent now see the national economy as getting worse, compared to 60 percent in October. About 11 percent say they're not sure whether the economy is improving or getting worse. In October, the figure was 9 percent. Nationally, a Gallup poll conducted Feb. 4 through Feb. 6 found the exact reverse to be true: 41 percent of Americans described the economy as getting better, while 47 percent characterized it as getting worse, and 10 percent said it was staying the same.

A similar rise in optimism appears in Tennesseans' assessment of their personal financial outlook for the coming year. Sixty-eight percent of the state's residents say they expect to be personally better off a year from now. In October, the proportion was 58 percent. Only 17 percent expect to be worse off. Twenty-seven percent predicted in October their personal finances would take a downturn.

Sharp differences about the condition of the national economy arise, however, between members of different political parties. Two in three Republicans (66 percent) describe the national economy as improving. But among Democrats, Independents and others, the figure drops to 36 percent. Confidence in the national economy is particularly low among non-Republicans who are black and non-Republicans who are both white and lack a college education. Among Republicans, poorer education also is associated with lower levels of confidence in the economy.

Optimism also varies greatly regarding one's personal finances. But the variation shows up chiefly among demographic segments other than those defined by party allegiance. Optimism is highest, for example, among Tennesseans age 18 to 49. Seventy-eight percent of individuals in

## Spring 2000 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/4

this age group think their fortunes will improve during the upcoming year, and those with no minor children living at home express the most optimism. But only 65 percent of state residents age 50 to 64 share that view. And optimism is lowest among Tennesseans age 65 and older, only 39 percent of whom think their personal finances will get better during the year to come. Furthermore, within the 50- to 64-year-old population, 81 percent of those with at least some college experience are optimistic. By contrast, only 42 percent of those with a high school education or less foresee a brighter economic future for themselves.

### **Support high for military strikes in Afghanistan, elsewhere**

Tennesseans in general remain highly supportive of U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan. They also support, although not quite as strongly, U.S.-led military attacks on other countries suspected of harboring terrorists. Overall, 86 percent of the state's residents approve of the nation's military strikes in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, 75 percent say they would approve of attacks led by the United States in Iraq, Somalia, the Philippines and other countries in which terrorists may be hiding.

These attitudes mirror national trends. For comparison, a CBS News/*New York Times* Poll in late January found that 87 percent of all Americans approved of the nation's military action in Afghanistan, and 73 percent approve of expanding the effort to include targets in countries like Iraq, Somalia, and the Philippines.

Although high, support for U.S. military action in the wake of Sept. 11 is by no means uniform. For example, 90 percent of whites say they approve of the U.S. military strikes in Afghanistan. Among non-whites, the figure drops to 74 percent. Among whites, meanwhile, opinions cleave along party lines, with Democrats generally expressing less support for the strikes than Republicans. Notably, moderate Democrats who read a daily newspaper more frequently exhibit somewhat lower support than moderate Democrats who read less frequently.

Party loyalty also appears to be the watershed in opinion about launching military strikes in countries other than Afghanistan. Sixty-three percent of the state's Democrats support military action in places like Iraq, Somalia, and the Philippines compared to 74 percent of Independents and 87 percent of Republicans. And among Republicans, higher levels of education associate with stronger support.

### **State residents split over necessity of capturing Osama bin Laden**

Opinion divides evenly across the state on whether the capture of al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is a prerequisite for declaring the military strikes in Afghanistan a success. Forty-six percent of the state's residents say bin Laden's capture is critical to the strikes' success, but another 46 percent say it isn't. The remaining 8 percent don't know. A similar division exists on the national level. According to a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in late January, 50 percent of Americans see bin Laden's capture as critical to success, and 44 percent do not.

Across the state, proportionally more women than men consider bin Laden's capture a key aspect of the Afghan campaign's success. Specifically, 53 percent of Tennessee women characterize his capture as critical compared to 39 percent of the state's men. Within both genders, however, less-educated individuals are more likely than better-educated individuals to consider bin Laden's capture a criteria for success.

### **Support running higher than usual for some free speech rights**

Support is running higher than usual in the state for some of the news media's free speech rights. For example, 52 percent of Tennesseans assert that the United States Constitution unconditionally protects a journalist's right to criticize politicians. In the Fall 1999 Middle Tennessee Poll, only 41 percent of respondents said a journalist's right to criticize politicians deserved unconditional protection. Similarly, 29 percent now say the Constitution absolutely protects a journalist's right to report classified information, and another 35 percent say the Constitution does so under certain circumstances. In 1999, 20 percent gave the right absolute Constitutional protection, and 28 percent gave the right qualified protection. Furthermore, 30 percent now, compared to 23 percent in 1999, say the media have an absolute right to publish violent photographs. Thirty-seven percent, compared to 32 percent in 1999, ascribe qualified protection to the right. Only 30 percent, compared to 41 percent in 1999, say the Constitution in no way protects journalists' right to publish such photos.

The pattern represents a trend detected in October during the Fall 2001 Middle Tennessee Poll and may be a characteristic of public opinion during times of national crisis. A similar effect was observed just before and during the Gulf War debate in 1990 (Wyatt, Free Expression and the American Public, American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1991).

Support for other free speech rights commonly exercised by the media remains largely unchanged. Thirty-three percent of Tennesseans say journalists have an absolute right to side with foreign governments against the position of the United States. Thirty-six percent say journalists have an unfettered right to criticize the military. And 22 percent say journalists have an unqualified right to report stories about national security without government approval.

On average, the state's men appear more supportive of free speech rights than do the state's women. Within both groups, though, support is moderate at best. On a zero-to-100-percent scale with 100 percent representing support for absolute Constitutional protection of all six rights, the state's men average 54 percent, and the state's women average 44 percent. Among men, better education seems to have the strongest association with higher support for journalists' free speech rights. Among women, the key factor is political orientation, with those from the political left and center expressing more support than those on the political right.

### **Television networks still drawing praise for coverage of Sept. 11 attacks**

The state's residents continue to hold relatively favorable opinions about how national television news networks covered the Sept. 11 attacks. The networks' attack coverage scored an average of 69 percent on an index measuring perceived fairness, neutrality, thoroughness, accuracy, and trustworthiness. For comparison, the networks scored a 52 percent for their coverage in general and a 44 percent for their coverage of the vote count in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

Similarly, attack coverage by the networks scored a 76 percent on a "public-mindedness" index measuring perceived concern for the nation's well being, stewardship of the public interest, attention to viewers' personal interests, and patriotism. Ratings for the networks' general news reporting averaged 58 percent, and ratings for the networks' coverage of the Florida vote count averaged 40 percent.

## Spring 2000 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/6

Both scores have dipped, however, since the Fall 2000 Middle Tennessee Poll in October. At that time, the networks' attack coverage earned a 75 percent on the credibility measure and an 80 percent on the public-mindedness index.

### **“God bless America” means ... lots of things**

The phrase “God bless America” has no single meaning for Tennesseans despite its frequent use in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks. Focusing perhaps on the “God” in “God bless America,” 28 percent of Tennesseans say the phrase has a mainly religious meaning. But another 38 percent – emphasizing, presumably, the “America” in “God bless America” – see a chiefly patriotic meaning in the phrase. And still another 24 percent ascribe some entirely different meaning to the phrase, such as one related to protection and safety. Ten percent say they have no idea what the phrase means.

A religious interpretation of the phrase appears more popular among people who describe themselves as politically conservative or far right. People who call themselves politically far left, liberal, or middle of the road tend toward a patriotic meaning. And whatever the phrase means, 91 percent of Tennesseans say God has done it in the past, and 75 percent believe God will continue to do it in the future. Those from the political left and center appear less convinced than those on the right that God has blessed America in the past. Interestingly, residents of Metro Nashville/Davidson County are less likely than Tennesseans living elsewhere to assert either that God has blessed America in the past or that God will bless America in the future.

## Spring 2000 Middle Tennessee Poll Summary/7

### Sample and Method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 18 through March 1, 2002 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 742 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 sample within 4 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. Other factors, such as question wording also affect the outcome of a survey. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups.

The sample varied somewhat from the U.S. Census Bureau's latest available projections for age, race and gender proportions within the state. Such variation commonly occurs because certain demographic groups are more difficult to contact. The data were thus weighted to more closely match Census projections for these demographics. Here are the relevant percentages:

	Census	Sample	Weight	Weighted Result
<b>Age:</b>				
18-34	30.2%	34.5%	0.87	31.4%
35-49	30.9%	30.9%	1.00	32.0%
50-64	22.4%	24.5%	0.92	21.4%
65+	16.5%	10.1%	1.63	15.2%
<b>Race</b>				
White	83.9%	87.6%	0.96	83.7%
Black	14.9%	6.8%	2.19	14.1%
Other	1.2%	5.6%	0.22	2.2%
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	47.4%	45.8%	1.16	47.4%
Female	52.6%	54.2%	0.97	52.6%