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Summary of Major Political Findings, Spring 2003

Most believe state problems solvable without tax hike. Fully 55% of Tennesseans believe that Gov. Phil Bredesen can solve the state's budget problems without raising taxes, though nearly one-third (32%) think not.

Majority supports income tax that includes sales tax cuts. Support for a state income tax that includes eliminating sales taxes on groceries and cutting sales taxes on other items has grown to 61% after moving well past a majority last fall.

Most erroneously believe majority opposes income tax. Vocal minorities can often make so much noise that it becomes difficult for citizens to gauge public opinion. Thus, fully 60% believe that the majority of Tennesseans are currently against an income tax with sales tax cuts – while exactly the reverse is the case, with support at 61%.

Bredesen approval high, legislature lags. A heavy majority (58%) of Tennesseans approve of the way Gov. Phil Bredesen is handling his job as governor. The Democratic legislative leadership receives approval by one-third (32%).

Bredesen gets high points for returning salary. Gov. Phil Bredesen earns high points for returning his \$85,000 annual salary to the state. Almost 70% believe others will think favorably of Bredesen for this act. Fully 75% do not believe he is making a sacrifice.

Education top problem, government inefficiency, taxes close. More citizens named the poor state of education as the state's main problem (16%) than any other single item, followed closely by government inefficiency and waste and high taxes (14% each).

State should spend more on schools, disadvantaged, environment. A big majority (72%) believe the state spends too little on elementary and secondary schools. Near majorities think too little is spent on community colleges and technical schools (49%), universities (49%), the retarded (49%), and the handicapped (46%).

Opinion polarized on TennCare spending. Fully 41% feel that TennCare spending is inadequate, but about one-third (30%) feel that too much is spent. Income is, not surprisingly, important in support for TennCare.

Transit, law enforcement, welfare, highways lower priorities. About 37% of Tennesseans feel too little is spent on mass transit. For law enforcement, 39% think too little is spent. Highway maintenance is closely divided, with 28% claiming too little and, 24% too much. Only about one-fifth (19%) feel that too little is spend on new highways.

Other issues. More than three-fourths (76%) rate state economic conditions poor or fair. Tennesseans like politicians who talk religion. Lottery support still strong.

Details of Major Political Findings, Spring 2003

Most believe state problems can be solved without a tax hike

Fully 55% of Tennesseans believe that Gov. Phil Bredesen can solve the state's budget problems without raising taxes, though nearly one-third (32%) think not. Here, political orientation is important. Fully 61% who identify themselves as conservative or on the far left believe no hike will be necessary. And 55% of liberals and middle-of-the-roaders agree. But only about one-third (32%) on the far right or those who give no identification concur. Interestingly, conservatives and those from the far left are not only equally optimistic about the budget, but talk radio seems to have an effect on them: 69% of those who listen to talk radio less than every day feel no tax hike will be necessary. But just half of daily talk listeners (51%) agree.

Majority support grows for income tax that includes sales tax cuts

Support for a state income tax that includes eliminating sales taxes on groceries and cutting sales taxes on other items has grown to 61% after surging well past the majority mark last fall. Backing also has risen since the fall both for an income tax plan tied to a "flat" rate structure and for an income tax plan offering a \$15,000 exemption per taxpayer. A state income tax plan combining all three measures – a cut in sales taxes, a flat rate structure, and a \$15,000 exemption per taxpayer – would find favor on at least one point with more than three-fourths (77%) of the state's population.

A year ago, the poll found 46% support for "an income tax plan that included ending the sales tax on groceries and lowering the sales tax on other items." Last fall, after the state Legislature raised sales taxes by a penny on the dollar, the poll saw backing leap to 58% for such a plan. The 61% supporting the plan in the present poll consists of 35% who favor it and another 26% who strongly favor it. Sixteen percent oppose the plan, and another 10% strongly oppose the plan, for a total of just over one in four (26%). The rest aren't sure (10%) or decline to answer (2%). Support is significantly greater (69%) among Tennesseans earning \$50,000 or less a year compared to the 53% support among those earning more than \$50,000 annually. Among the less wealthy, blacks are more supportive than whites.

Meanwhile, support for a "flat" income tax that would charge every taxpayer the same amount per dollar of income, regardless of earnings, drew 43% support in the present poll – up from 37% last fall. Similarly, an income tax plan that included a \$15,000 exemption per taxpayer edged to within a percentage point of majority support (49%) after garnering 44% support in the fall.

As in previous polls, Tennesseans clearly do not want an income tax simply enacted on top of the taxes they already pay. Asked about an income tax with no mention of a flat tax rate, exemptions, or reductions in sales taxes, only 26% express support. But even this figure is up modestly from the 22% support found in the fall.

Most erroneously believe majority opposes income tax with sales tax cuts

Vocal minorities can often make so much noise that it becomes difficult for citizens to gauge public opinion from news reports. Thus, fully 60% believe that the majority of Tennesseans are currently against an income tax with sales tax cuts – while exactly the reverse is the case. In this survey, 61% actually support that proposition.

In fact, the poorest Tennesseans – those making \$15,000 and less – are closer to correct in their estimates, guessing that 48% support that tax. Those making more than \$15,000, however, estimate that only 28% are supportive.

Concerning the future, however, a near majority (47%) think Tennesseans will move toward supporting an income tax with sales tax cuts. Just 35% see the future as moving against that income tax proposal. Women (54%) in particular think the future will bring increased support, while only 40% of men agree.

Those who think they're in the minority less likely to speak up on taxes

Our survey indicates that Tennesseans represent a classic case of an effect public opinion scholars call the “spiral of silence.” Those who think they are in the minority are less willing to voice their opinion than those who think they are in the majority – and the public is mistaken about who is in the majority. This silence “spirals” by making the reluctant-to-speak majority seem to be in the minority.

Thus, fully 65% of those who think that they are in the majority – regardless of whether they support or oppose an income tax with sales tax cuts – said they would voice their opinion in a waiting room where someone was speaking for the other side. But just 59% of those who think they are in the minority said that they would speak out.

But, because many Tennesseans are mistaken in their guess about the amount of support this tax proposal draws, and because a majority is actually supportive, that majority is less likely to be heard in proportion to its strength. Thus, 87% of those in opposition think they are in the majority, while only 46% who support the tax proposal think they are in the majority.

Given these perceptions, 61% of those who oppose that tax are willing to speak up for their position, while 62% of those who support the tax are willing to speak up. This would make a casual bystander assume that people are split about 50-50, while the real percentages are 61% for and 27% against. The remainder are unsure or did not respond.

Bredesen approval high, but legislature lags

A heavy majority (58%) of Tennesseans approve of the way Phil Bredesen is handling his job as governor. This compares well with the 63% favorability rating that former-Gov. Don Sundquist received four years ago in our mid-state poll, before his popularity dropped to 38% in fall 2001. But significant numbers this year are understandably taking a wait-and-see attitude toward Bredesen, with nearly one-third (29%) reporting no opinion.

As might be expected, Bredesen scores highly with Democrats (69%), but he does well with Republicans and independents too (57%). Only those with no party preference rate him lower (42%).

The Democratic legislative leadership receives an approval rate of about one-third (32%), compared to 56% in fall 2001 for Middle Tennessee only. Today, fully one-third (33%) disapproves of the legislature, while about another third (31%) say they don't know. Here, a majority of Democrats (57%) approve but a plurality of Republicans and independents (46%) disapprove.

Bredesen gets high points for returning annual salary.

Gov. Phil Bredesen earned high points for returning his \$85,000 annual salary to the state. Almost 70% of those polled believe other Tennesseans will think favorably of Bredesen for not accepting a salary for the duties he performs as Tennessee's governor.

A majority of Tennesseans (56%) knew of Bredesen's decision not to accept a salary because of the state's financial shortages. Younger (18-34) and poorer Tennesseans, those earning less than 15K annually, those not registered to vote, Tennesseans residing in western portion of the state, and individuals who rarely read or listen to the news media were least likely to know of the governor's decision.

Approximately 61% of Tennesseans responded correctly that the governor's personal wealth is \$1 million or more. Therefore, it was not surprising that more than three-quarters (75%) do not believe Bredesen's salary refusal represents a sacrifice for him and his family.

Education still top problem, government inefficiency and taxes close behind

More citizens named the poor state of education as the state's main problem (16%) than any other single item, followed closely by government inefficiency and waste and high taxes (14% each). Perceptions of the state's problems were virtually identical to our fall 2002 survey, though percentages are different because of a new way of calculating that variable.

State should spend more on schools, programs for disadvantaged, environment

A heavy majority of Tennesseans (72%) believe the state is spending too little on elementary and secondary schools – up from 63% of Middle Tennesseans in our poll four years ago.¹ Age is understandably very important here, but a majority (53%) even of those 65 and older believe the state is spending too little, compared with 76% of those under 65. There are also dramatic racial differences, with 85% of blacks agreeing that too little is spend, compared to 70% from all other races.

Other priorities pale in comparison to elementary and secondary education, but near majorities think too little is spent on state community colleges and technical schools (49%) and state universities (49%). Women, in particular, feel that too little is spent on community colleges and technical schools (52%), but 46% of men agree. Those who identify themselves as liberals prove most supportive of universities (75%), a figure that drops to 47% among conservatives, middle-of-the-roaders, and those on the far left. Those on the far right and those who gave no political preference were least supportive (33%).

There is also strong support for programs to aid to those who may not be able to help themselves. A near majority (49%) believe that too little is spent on programs for the mentally retarded, while 46% believe that too little is spent on the handicapped. Fully 45% believe that too little is spend on mental health, and 43% feel likewise about foster care.

Environmental spending also scores highly with state residents, with another near majority (49%) agreeing that the state spends too little. Non-whites in particular believe that too little is

¹ When there are no significant regional differences in the current poll, we simply compare the statewide figures with our Middle Tennessee-only figures from the 1998 MTPoll.

spent on the environment (80%), compared with 43% among whites and those who did not identify their race.

Opinion polarized on TennCare spending

Perhaps due to the critical attention focused on TennCare as a hot-button issue, Tennessee opinion is polarized. While 41% feel that TennCare spending is inadequate, about one-third (30%) feel that too much is spent. Income is, not surprisingly, important in support for TennCare. Nearly half (46%) of those reporting incomes of more than \$50,000 think too much is spend. This figure drops to 32% too much among those making \$25-40,000, and to 16% among those making under \$15,000 and, oddly, those making \$40-50,000.

Among the state's wealthier citizens, political orientation is particularly important. Nearly two-thirds (66%) of conservatives and those on the far right think too much is spent on TennCare. This drops to only 26% for middle-of-the-roaders, liberals, those on the far left, and those who identified no orientation.

Transit, law enforcement, welfare, highways lower spending priorities

Even with mass transit, law enforcement, welfare, and highway spending, substantial pluralities feel that too little is spent. For example, regarding mass transit, 37% opt for too little. And support for mass transit is particularly strong in Nashville and surrounding counties, which are among the state's fastest-growing areas. Here, 46% think too little is spend on mass transit. On the other hand, just about a third (33%) of those outside the Nashville MSA think too little is spent.

Where law enforcement is concerned, 39% think too little is spent, with females (45%) outpacing males (32%). Welfare is a closely divided issue, with 30% opting for too much, 26% for too little, and 30% for about right. Here, Republicans opt for too much by 42% while only one-fourth (25%) from all other party identifications agree. Highway maintenance is also closely divided, with 28% claiming too little, 24% too much, and 41% about right.

Few Tennesseans, however, feel that there should be more spending on new highway construction. More than one-third (35%) say too much is spent, and 39% opt for about right. Only about one-fifth (19%) feel that too little is spend.

West Tennesseans are most supportive of new highways. Fully one-fourth (25%) feel that too little is spend, as 17% in Middle and East Tennessee.

Mood of Tennessee mixed, thumbs down on economy

Satisfaction with the direction the state is headed is split, with 46% satisfied and 49% dissatisfied. This dissatisfaction transcends most demographic lines, though there are minor gender differences. More than three-fourths (76%) rate state economic conditions poor or fair. Along gender lines, 81% of women and 70% of men opt for fair to poor.

When a Mood of Tennessee scale is produced by averaging satisfaction with the governor, the direction of the state, and the economy, the total is 53 out of 100. Here, Middle Tennesseans are significantly more satisfied (mean = 58) than those from East or West Tennessee (mean = 48), a finding that may be due to their acquaintance with the new governor.

Tennesseans like politicians who talk religion

It's perfectly OK for a politician to talk about his or her religious beliefs, even when engaging in clearly governmental activities like making a campaign speech or commenting on a proposed law, most Tennesseans say. Church and state may be separate, but as far as most state residents are concerned, religion and politics aren't.

A slim majority of Tennesseans (52%) said it would be either always OK or usually OK for a politician to talk about his or her religious beliefs "when commenting on a proposed law." Even more (69%) approved of a politician's doing so while giving a campaign speech. More than three-fourths (78%) considered it appropriate for a politician to express religious beliefs during a "public ceremony honoring someone who has died," and Tennesseans give near unanimous approval (91%) to a politician's expressing religious beliefs "while attending worship services with his or her family." Furthermore, 40% said they would either definitely or probably vote for a politician who expressed religious beliefs in each of these situations, and 59% said they thought others would do so, too.

Differences can be pronounced, however, across race and party lines. For example, more whites (83%) than blacks (52%) say it's OK for a politician to express religious beliefs during a public service honoring someone who has died. And among whites, 90% of Republicans and Independents would approve compared to 72% of Democrats. Likewise, more whites (56%) than blacks (33%) would approve of a politicians' expressing religious beliefs when commenting on a proposed law. Furthermore, among whites, nearly three in four Republicans (72%) would approve compared to less than half (46%) of Democrats and Independents. Religious remarks on the campaign trail meet with the approval of 87% of Republicans compared to 68% of Independents and 58% of Democrats. And while a solid majority (54%) of Republicans would vote for a politician who expressed religious beliefs in all of these situations, only about a third (34%) of Democrats and Independents would do so.

Lottery support still strong

Despite recent legislative and lobbying controversy, support for a state lottery to fund education is still strong and may, in fact, have increased slightly. In the current poll, 64% indicated support for the lottery, compared with 59% in last fall's MTPoll.

As in the past, religious attendance is a good predictor of lottery support, with only 46% of those who attend once a week or more favorable. Fully 82% of those who attend from once a month to never, however, were favorable.

Asked whether they would vote for the lottery now, 62% said yes, again with religious attendance an important predictor. Eighty percent of those who attend once a month or less opted for yes, compared to 57% of those who attend once a week or more.

Slightly more than 30% of Tennesseans have a great deal of confidence in the executive branch, with nearly a majority (48%) conservatives expressing high confidence.

Corporate scandals such as those surrounding Enron and WorldCom have caused erosion in Tennesseans confidence in major companies. Only 14% of Tennesseans have a great deal of confidence in major companies, down from 22% among Middle Tennesseans in fall 1998.

Less than a quarter (24%) of Tennesseans has a great deal of confidence in organized religion, down from 33% in fall 1998. Again, political orientation is important, with 34% of conservatives and far rightists expressing a great deal of confidence, compared with 20% from the middle of the road and liberals.

Appendix A: Measuring attitudes in polls

Attitudes toward many issues – such as taxes, military actions, or immigrants – are complex. The same person may hold several contradictory notions and balance them off against each other to determine an overall attitude.

For example, in forming an attitude toward abortion, the same person may believe that abortion should not be used as a method of birth control. When asked bluntly whether he or she is in favor of abortion, that person might reply either “No” or “Yes.” This is because the same person could also believe that abortion is acceptable in cases of incest, rape, or serious defects in the fetus.

To learn the person's attitude, a survey researcher must therefore ask more than one question, then report the results in all their complexity. Complexity, however, is shunned by many candidates. Lobbyists and interest groups may campaign as if an issue is “black or white” when, for many people, it is both black and white.

The same process is true for issues like the state income tax or a proposed invasion of Iraq. Asking one question rarely elicits the complexity of an underlying attitude. Thus, good survey researchers employ multiple questions asked over time to establish trends.

Appendix B: Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone in late Feb. 17. to March 1, 2003, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 609 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of ± 4 percentage points at the 95% level of confidence. Theoretically, this means that a sample of this size should produce a statistical portrait of the population within 4 percentage points 95 out of 100 times. Other factors, such as question wording, also affect the outcome of a survey. Error margins are greater for sample subgroups.

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

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	30.2%	34.6%	0.87	30.3%
35-49	30.9%	26.4%	1.17	31.3%

MTPoll–StateWide, Spring 2003, Political Report, p. 8

50-64	22.4%	23.8%	0.94	22.3%
65+	16.5%	15.2%	1.09	16.1%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Race:

White	83.9%	89.1%	0.94	84.1%
Black	14.9%	6.5%	2.29	14.6%
Other	1.2%	4.3%	0.28	1.3%
	100.0%	99.9%		100.0%

Gender:

Male	47.4%	49.6%	0.96	46.6%
Female	52.6%	50.4%	1.04	53.4%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Small variations in reported percentages (1% or less) sometimes result for rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights.