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Summary of Major Social Findings, Spring 2003

Strong support for gay job and housing rights, not marriage. Fully 80% of Tennesseans believe that gay men and lesbians should be guaranteed equal housing rights, and nearly as many (78%) support equal employment rights. But less than one-third (30%) think that gays should have full marital rights.

Majority of believers think Columbia astronauts in heaven. Fewer than half of Tennesseans (42%) believe, as President Bush implied, that the Columbia astronauts are in heaven. But of the 74% who believe in the afterlife at all, more than half (53%) think they are in heaven, while one-third said they don't know. The Baptist astronaut received the highest in-heaven percentage (85%), while the Hindu received the lowest (65%).

Support for journalists' rights somewhat higher than after 9/11. About one-third (32%) of Tennesseans would protect unconditionally the right of journalists to report classified information the government wishes to keep secret – up slightly from 28% in our fall 2001 survey. Just over a fourth (27%) would offer no protection for that right at all, down substantially from 39% in 2001.

What nuclear enrichment plant where? Despite controversy in Middle Tennessee concerning a proposal to build a uranium enrichment plant in Hartsville, the issue is hardly visible in the public's mind. When respondents were asked what news story concerned Hartsville, only one fourth (25%) said a proposed nuclear plan. However, nearly a majority of Middle Tennesseans (48%) answered correctly, indicating the salience of the issue in Nashville and surrounding areas.

Nuclear power less polluting than oil, coal, but hydroelectric wins. Just over one-fourth (25%) of Tennesseans believe the nuclear power produces a great deal of pollution, but well over a majority (58%) felt similarly toward coal-fired sources. Fully 46% felt oil produced a great deal of pollution, and even 5% felt that hydroelectric power produced a great deal

State, like nation, doesn't like going it alone in Iraq. Though Tennesseans would like to see Saddam Hussein defeated, they are hesitant to see the United State act without the participation or approval of others. For example, a majority (56%) favors sending ground troops to remove Hussein when the question is asked in the abstract. The favorable percentage rises to nearly three-fourths (74%) if the UN supports the move, but to less than a majority (38%) with United Nations opposition.

Military reigns supreme in public confidence. The military currently merits the highest confidence of any public institutions, receiving a rating of a great deal by 67% for Tennesseans. Medicine is second at 40%, followed by the Supreme Court at 35%.

Details of Major Social Findings, Spring 2003

Strong support for gay job and housing rights, but not marriage

Fully 82% of Tennesseans believe that gay men and lesbians should be guaranteed equal housing rights, and nearly as many (78%) support equal employment rights. But Tennesseans seem to draw the line firmly between civil rights and marital rights, with the accompanying religious associations. Thus, under one-third (29%) think that gays should have full marital rights.

Religious attendance is an important predictor of attitudes. But even among those who attend services weekly, support is solid, with 72% opting for gay job rights – compared to 85% among those who attend less frequently or not at all. Political affiliation also plays an important role in support for housing rights, though support across party identification is solid: 88% for Democrats, 87% for independents, and 74% for Republicans.

For gay marital rights, the split is between those who never attend services or gave no answer (58% favorable), those who attend seldom or about once a month (32% favorable) and those who attend services at least once a week (19% favorable). Given a list of groups considered a threat to the social order, 9% identified homosexuals, second lowest to welfare recipients (4%).

Majority of believers think Columbia astronauts in heaven

Though President Bush implied that the astronauts on the ill-fated Columbia space shuttle flight are now in heaven – regardless of their religion – fewer than half of Tennesseans (42%) agree. In fact, 16% of Tennesseans say they do not believe in life after death, and another 6% are not sure, for a total of 20%.

But, among the heavy majority who do believe in an afterlife (74%), more than half (53%) believe that some or all of the astronauts are in heaven. However, about one-third of those who believe say they do not know the eternal fate of the astronauts, and 12% say no.

When asked about the fate of individual astronauts as identified by religion, state respondents gave higher levels of support for those astronauts with beliefs similar to those you would expect among Tennesseans. Eighty-five percent of respondents said that the Baptist astronaut was now in heaven, while the Charismatic and Episcopalian received 81 each, the Jew 73%, the Unitarian 72%, and the Hindu 65%.

When believers in the after life were asked if they think that President Bush has special knowledge regarding the eternal fate of the astronauts, 93% said that he did not. Interestingly, a majority seemed to think that they knew the fate of each astronaut.

During a memorial service for the Columbia astronauts President Bush requested prayers of hope that the flyers made it “home.”

Most respondents believe in life after death, but this belief varied by political perspective. Though politically strange bedfellows, 91 percent of those calling themselves either far left or conservative believe in life after death, while just 60 percent of those calling themselves liberal or far right did. Those who saw themselves in the political middle were in the center on this as well, with 70 percent expressing belief in an afterlife.

Support for journalists' rights somewhat higher than after 9/11

Though war is looming with Iraq, the public is guardedly more supportive of journalistic rights that might affect war coverage today than in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorism episode. The level of support, however, may displease many journalists and rights advocates.

About one-third (32%) would protect unconditionally the right of journalists to report classified information the government wishes to keep secret – up slightly from 28% in our fall 2001 survey. More importantly, today just over a fourth (27%) would offer no protection for that right at all, down substantially from 39% in 2001. These shifts doubtless reflect current public ambivalence toward invading Iraq, while there was little such ambivalence after 9/11.

Similarly, the right of journalists to side with foreign government who take a position different from the U.S. increased. More than one-third (36%) would protect that right unconditionally now, as opposed to 30% in 2001. And the number who would not protect that right at all declined from 44% to 36%.

Again, the percentage of those unwilling to protect at any time the right of journalists to report about national security without government approval has dropped from 55% to 45%. Those willing to offer at least some protection have increased from 20% to 27%. And those willing to offer unconditional protection have risen marginally, from 22% to 24%.

By contrast, support for the right of journalists to criticize the military remains virtually unchanged since the aftermath of 9/11. Today, 38% would protect that right unconditionally, while 33% would offer no protection. The rest (24%) opt for partial protection. And a plurality (45%) would protect the right of journalists to criticize politicians all the time, a number similar to fall 2001 (44%).

The right of journalists to depict graphic images of violent events also showed almost no change. Today, about one-third (30%) would protect this right at all times, while more than one-fourth (27%) would not offer any protection. A plurality (41%) would offer partial protection.

What nuclear enrichment plant? Where?

Despite controversy in Middle Tennessee concerning a proposal to build a uranium enrichment plant in Hartsville, the issue is hardly visible in the public's mind. When a random half were asked what news story concerned Hartsville, only one fourth (25%) said a proposed nuclear plan. However, nearly a majority of Middle Tennesseans (48%) answered correctly, indicating the salience of the issue in Nashville and surrounding areas.

Another random half was asked where in Tennessee a proposed uranium processing plant was to be located. Here, just under one-fourth (23%) got the right answer. The highest score came from Middle Tennesseans (37%) except for Nashvillians. On this form of the question, Nashvillians matched the rest of the state, with 14% correct.

Nuclear power less polluting than oil, coal, but hydroelectric wins

Just over one-fourth (25%) of Tennesseans believe the nuclear power produces a great deal of pollution, but well over a majority (58%) felt similarly toward coal-fired sources. Fully 46% felt oil produced a great deal of pollution, and even 5% felt that hydroelectric power produced a great deal.

Forty-five percent felt that nuclear power is either mostly or entirely safe. By contrast, 53% feel oil power is mostly or entirely safe and 59% feel coal power is mostly or entirely safe. But fully 79 percent rate hydroelectric power entirely or mostly safe.

Military reigns supreme in public confidence

The military currently merits the highest confidence of any public institutions, receiving a rating of a great deal by 67% for Tennesseans. Medicine holds second place at 40%, followed by the U.S. Supreme Court at 35%.

Concerning the military, political orientation is important. While 70% identifying themselves as middle-of-the-road, conservative, or far left expressed a great deal of confidence, the figure drops to 60% for liberals and those on the far right. Note that, in political orientation, those choosing far left or far right labels have a certain unpredictability.

Note, also, that in times of national threat, military confidence climbs rapidly, only to fall to lower levels in times of calm. In the fall of 1997, for example, 47% of Middle Tennesseans expressed high confidence in the military.

More than a third of Tennesseans have hardly any confidence in either advertising, (40%), television (36%), or the press (32%). And about one-quarter (24%) have hardly any confidence in public relations.

For the press, political orientation is important, with the lowest ratings (39% hardly any confidence) coming from liberals, conservatives, and those on the far left. By contrast, just one fourth (25%) of those identifying themselves in the middle have little confidence in the press. Ironically, then, those on the left and those on the right seem to share disdain for the press.

State, like nation, doesn't like going it alone in Iraq

Tennesseans in general approve of the use of U.S. troops to remove Saddam Hussein, but would be more comfortable with Congressional support, even if the United Nations or other countries disapprove of the war. For example, a majority (56%) favors sending ground troops to remove Hussein when the question is asked in the abstract.

The percentage favorable rises to nearly three-fourths (74%) if the UN supports the move, but to less than a majority (38%) with United Nations opposition. Again, nearly 75% support the invasion if other nations agree but drops to 38% if other nations oppose. Thus, any opposition seems to make support melt.

Tennessee opinion is close to that of the nation. A nationwide Gallup Poll conducted March 3-5 found 59% in favor of sending ground troops. That figure drops to 38% when the issue of UN opposition is introduced.

What Tennesseans think of President Bush is the best predictor of their attitude toward an invasion of Iraq. Thus, a majority (53%) of those who approve of Bush favor invasion even with U.N. opposition, but only 20% of those who disapprove of Bush favor action.

When Bush is removed from the equation, party identification becomes the most important predictor. More than half (53%) of Republicans but only one-third (31%) of all other affiliations favor action in the face of U.N. opposition.

Bush’s overall approval rating stands at 55%, with 35% disapproval. Just 10% were uncertain or refused to say.

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 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%
50-64	22.4%	23.8%	0.94	22.3%

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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.