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Summary of Major Findings Spring 2004

Bush, Kerry nearly tied in contest defined by racial, religious battle lines. President George W. Bush and Sen. John Kerry are running neck and neck among Tennessee's voters. Bush's strongest support is among white Evangelical Christians.

Economy nation's new No. 1 problem. The poor state of the economy is named by about one in five (19%) as the nation's No. 1 problem – a dramatic shift from last fall's poll, where terrorism beat the economy by 20% to 12%.

Most dissatisfied with national direction. Nearly two-thirds (63%) of Tennesseans said they are dissatisfied with the direction that the United States is heading. And two-thirds regard national economic conditions as only fair (35%) or poor (31%).

Iraq War approval drops under half. Support for the war in Iraq has now dropped to under half, with 47% saying the war was worthwhile and 48% saying it was not, a statistical tie close to the national norm. In our fall 2003 poll, fully 54% characterized the war as worthwhile.

Bredesen approval out the top. Gov. Phil Bredesen's 72% approval rating is the highest ever recorded in the MTSU Poll's five-year history.

Health care state's new No. 1 problem. Nearly one-fourth (23%) named health issues as the top state problem. Education led the list in fall 2003. It now ranks third behind the economy.

Most reserved about economic conditions, Bredesen budget. Just over one-fourth (29%) rate Tennessee's economy as excellent, while 46% say it is only fair. Nearly a majority (47%) approve of Gov. Bredesen's new budget, which includes education increases and TennCare cuts.

Lottery Director Rebecca Paul's approval climbs. Despite the lottery's smooth start, only 43% approve of the job Lottery Director Rebecca Paul is doing. Paul's approval, however, is significantly higher than in fall 2003, when 23% approved. Many are still reserving judgment.

Support for gay marriage lower, civil rights still high. With the debate surrounding gay marriage, support has dropped from 24% in fall 2003 to 20% in the current poll – a change within the poll's error margin. Support for gay civil rights, however, remains above 80%.

Few lose jobs to illegal immigrants. Respondents are divided about whether they think immigrants take desirable jobs from Americans, with 47% on both sides. But only 5% say they have lost a job to an immigrant. A majority (56%) opposes work permits for illegal immigrants.

Details of Major Spring 2004 Findings, First Release

Bush, Kerry tied in contest defined by racial, religious battle lines

President George W. Bush would have a serious fight on his hands in Tennessee if the general election were held today. Forty-eight percent of Tennesseans said they would choose Bush over Sen. John Kerry, the presumptive Democratic nominee. But almost as many (44%) say they would pick Kerry over Bush. The percentages indicate Bush may be slightly ahead of Kerry. But there's also a good chance the race is presently a statistical dead heat that, barring defections from either camp, will come down to choices made by the 8% or so of Tennesseans who described themselves as undecided.

As might be expected, measures of political affiliation are the chief predictors of these reported voting intentions, with devoted Republicans lining up behind Bush and ardent Democrats backing Kerry. But a look behind these factors reveals major fault lines along racial and religious dimensions. For example, 84% of blacks say they'll vote for Kerry compared to 37% of whites. And among whites, nearly two-thirds of Evangelical Christians (60%) are Bush supporters compared to about a third (38%) of non-Evangelicals. The percentages were similar for hypothetical contests between Bush and Sen. John Edwards, who recently bowed out of the Democratic primary, and between Bush and "the Democratic Party's candidate." Behind political identification, race and Evangelicalism were also the chief predictors of Bush's job approval. Fifty-eight percent of whites approve of Bush's job performance compared to only a quarter (24%) of blacks. And among whites, Evangelical Christians are about twice as likely as non-Evangelicals to approve of Bush's job performance. Overall, just about half (53%) of Tennesseans approve of Bush's job performance – about the same as in our fall 2003 poll.

These figures suggest that political loyalties in Tennessee continue to reflect the national pattern, where committed, white Evangelical Protestants are increasingly aligning with the Republican Party while less committed white Protestants, black Protestants, Jews and seculars are moving toward the Democratic Party.

In at least one exception to this pattern, age, not race or religious identity, is the chief predictor of attitudes toward Bush's proposal for sending astronauts to land on the Moon and Mars. A slim majority (52%) of Tennesseans age 18-34 approved of the plan, compared to only 31% of those age 35 to 64, and just 9% of those age 65 or older.

Poor economy nation's No. 1 problem

In a new development, the poor state of the economy is named by about one in five (19%) as the nation's No. 1 problem, followed by terrorism at 15%. This is a dramatic shift from last fall's poll, where terrorism beat the economy by 20% to 12%.

Most dissatisfied with national direction, economic conditions

Nearly two-thirds (63%) of respondents said they are dissatisfied with the direction that the United States is heading, while about one-third (33%) disagreed. Here, political polarization is obvious, with 87% of Democrats and 61% of Independents dissatisfied. A slim majority (52%) of Republicans, however, express satisfaction.

About two-thirds of Tennesseans regard national economic conditions as only fair (35%) or poor (31%). Just over one-fourth (27%) say conditions are good, and 5% choose excellent. Again, political affiliation is important, with 93% of Democrats choosing fair or poor, matched by 62% of Independents and others, but only 39% of Republicans.

Tennesseans are also closely divided about whether the economy is getting better (47%) or worse (44%). Fully 75% of Republicans opt for better, a belief shared by 56% of Independents. For Democrats and others, two-thirds (66%) opt for worse.

Still, concerning personal finances, 63% pick better, only 19% choose worse, and another 18% say the don't know. Fully 74% of Republicans and Independents feel their finances will be better, but only 44% of Democrats or those who don't know what their political affiliation is agree.

Iraq War approval drops under half

Support for the war in Iraq has now dropped to under half, with 47% saying the situation in Iraq was worth going to war over and 48% saying that it was not – a statistical tie that is close to the national norm. In our fall 2003 poll, fully 54% found the war worthwhile, and 40% did not, indicating a significant shift among Tennesseans.

Predictably, political party is important here, with 78% of self-identified Republicans saying the war was worthwhile, as opposed to just 12% of Democrats. About half (51%) of Independents deem the war worthwhile. These and other measures of attitude toward the war indicate that the country is highly polarized.

About four in ten (42%) of Tennesseans say that the Bush administration deliberately misled the public about the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but even more (48%) say the administration did not. Again, the figures are close to national averages.

Party loyalty is an important predictor of opinion regarding whether the Bush administration misled the public: 87% of Republicans say that it did not, compared with only 13% of Democrats. Independents were split, with 45% saying the public was not misled and 42% saying the public was misled.

Paradoxically, however, a majority (41%) say that they approve of the way the Bush administration is handling the war. Again, the issue is polarized by political affiliation. Only 15% of Democrats approve of Bush's handling of the war, compared to a majority (55%) of Independents and others and an overwhelming 85% of Republicans.

Considering whether U.S. intelligence agencies provided inaccurate information about Iraq's military capability, a majority (52%) said yes, but a third (31%) disagreed. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Democrats agreed that intelligence was inaccurate, compared with 29% of Republicans and 47% of Independents.

More Tennesseans (42%) think Saddam Hussein should be tried in an international court rather than by an Iraqi court (30%). Just 20% opt for a U.S. military tribunal. A nationwide poll in December by Gallup found that 48% of Americans preferred a trial in an international court, while 25% wanted a trial in an Iraqi court, and 24% wanted a trial in a U.S. military court.

Bredesen approval out the top

Gov. Phil Bredesen's 72% approval rating is the highest ever recording in the MTSU Poll's five-year history – an finding that coincides with the introduction of his new budget designed to increase education spending and control TennCare costs. Last fall, his approval rating stood at 56%.

While nearly a third (32%) in the fall 2003 poll said they did not know how good a job Bredesen was doing, that figure has now dropped to less that one-fifth (18%).

Bredesen's approval is even higher among women than men. A full 76% of females approve of his job in office, as opposed to 68% of men.

By contrast, the Democratic legislative leadership gets a 45% approval rating, with about one-third (32%) reporting no opinion.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Tennesseans report that they are satisfied with the state's direction. Here, however, men (70%) are more satisfied than women (61%).

Health care tops education as Tennessee's No. 1 problem

The poor state of health services and insurance trumps all other issues for the first time in this poll's five-year history. Nearly one-fourth (23%) of respondents named health issues in an open-ended question asking about the top state problem. The economy came in second (14%), followed closely by education (13%).

This differs markedly form our fall 2003 survey, where the poor state of education lead the list (15%), followed by the economy (14%), then health care (11%). Notice, however, that this shift does not represent so much a decrease in the priority of education and the economy as an increase in the awareness of health care and insurance issues.

There were differences by race regarding the No. 1 problem. For African Americans, the economy tended to rate higher (21%), followed by health care (18%), then crime (15%). Among whites, health care (24%) was followed by education (13%) and the economy (12%).

Most reserved about economic conditions, Bredesen budget

Just over one-fourth (29%) rate Tennessee's economy as excellent, while 46% say it is only fair. For 21% of Tennesseans, the economy is poor.

Although nearly a majority (47%) say they approve of Gov. Bredesen's new budget – which increases education spending but cuts TennCare – about an equal number either don't know or did not answer the question.

Approval is highest in Metro Nashville and surrounding counties (63%), compared with about 42% in other regions.

An overwhelming majority (83%) approve of increased education spending in the budget. They are less pleased with cuts in TennCare. There, nearly a majority (48%) approves of the cuts, but 40% do not. Disapproval is highest among African Americans (63%), as opposed to whites (36%).

Fully 69% approve of Bredesen's proposal to increase construction on college campuses, if one-third of the cost is matched by private funds raised by the institutions. But more than two-thirds (65%) also agree with the proposal's critics, who say that smaller institutions will have more trouble raising matching private funds.

Lottery Director Rebecca Paul's approval climbs

Despite the state lottery's smooth and fast start, only 43% approve of the job Lottery Director Rebecca Paul is doing – a figure that has risen from 23% in fall 2003. About one-fifth (21%) do not approve. Still, more than one-third (35%) say they still don't know how good a job she is doing.

Religious attendance is important regarding Paul's current rating, with 40% of weekly or almost-weekly attenders and non-attenders approving, compared with 48% of those who attend religious services less frequently.

Support for gay marriage lower, gay civil rights remains high

Given the flurry of news reports about the issuing of marriage licenses to gay couples in San Francisco and elsewhere – and President Bush's announced support for a Constitutional ban – support for gay marriage in Tennessee has dropped somewhat, from 24% in fall 2003 to 20% in the current poll. That change is, however, technically within the margin of error for the two polls.

Support for gay civil rights, including job and housing rights, however, remains above 80% and may even have increased slightly – but again within polling error margins.

Thus, increased attention to the gay marriage issue seems to have had little overall effect. If the issue is seen as one of basic human rights for gays, Tennesseans support it. If the issue veers into religious territory, however, support withers rapidly.

Support for gay civil unions – that carry some rights of marriage but do not use that term – was somewhat higher. Here, nearly one-third (31%) of Tennesseans supported civil unions, though 62% were opposed. Questions about gay marriage or gay civil unions were randomly assigned to different respondents to produce an experimental design.

Self-identified Evangelicals, who represent more two-thirds (69%) of Tennesseans, are significantly more opposed to gay marriage and gay unions. Only 11% of Evangelicals and those who did not provide details of their religious orientation supported gay unions, as opposed to 46% of non-Evangelicals. With gay unions, 22% of Evangelicals were in support, compared with a majority (55%) of others.

By contrast, fully 82% of all Tennesseans support gay job rights, and 84% support gay housing rights. Where gay civil rights are concerned, beliefs about the Bible – whether it is the literal word of God, the inspired but not literal word, or just an ancient narrative – become more important than identification as an Evangelical. However, heavy majorities in all categories – including Biblical literalists – support gay civil rights.

While 75% of literalists and those who don't know about their Biblical views support gay job rights, fully 92% of non-literalists agree. And for gay housing rights, 77% of literalists and "don't knows" are in support, compared with 93% of non-literalists.

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of Evangelicals describe themselves as literal believers of the Bible, while one-third (33%) do not.

Tennesseans are divided about whether the U.S. Constitution should be amended to define marriage as a relation only between a man and a woman. Nearly half (49%) said yes, but 41% said no. A crucial 10% remains undecided.

Here, political orientation is the best predictor, with nearly a majority (48%) of those on the left and the middle opting to let states make the marriage laws. But more than two-thirds (68%) on the right favor amending the Constitution.

About two-thirds (64%) of Tennesseans are opposed to the ordination of gays, a figure similar to last fall's survey. For gay clergy, fully three-fourths (75%) of Evangelicals give a thumbs down, compared to just over a majority (53%) of those who report that they are not Evangelicals.

Nearly three-fourths (72%) of Tennesseans say that the ordination of a gay bishop in the Episcopal Church violates Christian teaching. Among Evangelicals, fully 81% consider a gay bishop a violation.

Tennesseans, however, firmly support the ordination of women as clergy, with nearly two-thirds (63%) in support and less than one-third (30%) opposed. A majority of Biblical literalists (50%) support women's ordination, compared with fully 75% of others.

Immigrants thought to take more desirable jobs than they do

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Respondents are again divided in their perceptions of whether immigrants take desirable jobs away from Americans, with 47% on both sides. For those with high school diplomas or less, 65% feel that immigrants take desirable jobs, compared to only 36% with higher education levels.

However, when respondents were asked whether they personally had lost a job to an immigrant, a small 5% said yes, and 91% said no. Nearly one in ten (9%) with high school educations or less said they had lost such a job, compared to only 2% of those with more education.

Those with a high school education or less made up 43% of our sample, while 56 reported some college or technical school training or above.

A firm majority (56%) opposes President Bush's plan to provide work permits to allow illegal immigrants to work in the United States legally. Men (61%), in particular, opposed the plan, compared with 51% of women.

Unexpectedly, Bush's work permit proposal fared worse among a random half of respondents who were asked about permits for "undocumented" immigrants than among the other half, who were asked instead about "illegal" immigrants. Fully 71% opposed permits for "undocumented" immigrants. The phrase "undocumented" tends to be preferred by immigrant-advocacy groups. Further research will be necessary to see just why "undocumented" generated a more negative response from Tennesseans.

A heavy majority (61%) of Tennesseans believe that the president proposed the work-permit plan to aid his re-election bid. This opinion is particularly pronounced among Democrats (80%) and Independents (55%), though 41% of Republicans and others agree.

Asked whether Bush proposed the plan to aid the economy – which some say benefits from less-inexpensive immigrant labor – Tennesseans were split 42% yes and 42% no. Republicans and Independents (47%) opted for the economic-benefit explanation, while 35% of Democrats and others agreed.

Fully 59% of Tennesseans oppose giving health care to undocumented workers, with whites (63%) leading blacks (40%) in opposition. Regarding access to education, the split is close, with 46% favoring and 49% opposing. Fully 75% say it is easier to get into the United States than other countries.

More than two-thirds (65%) say they know immigrants personally, with those with at least some college more likely (75%) to answer “yes” than those with a high school education or less (51%). And 57% say they have immigrant friends. A majority (53%) say they would approve of a family member’s marrying an immigrant.

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.

Appendix B: Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 16 to Feb. 28, 2004, by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 701 people age 18 or older whose telephone numbers had been chosen at random by a computer from among all possible telephone numbers in the state. The poll has an estimated error margin of \pm 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	29.6%	22.9%	1.29	23.8%
35-49	30.2%	30.8%	0.98	31.2%
50-64	23.6%	27.0%	0.87	26.3%
65+	16.6%	19.4%	0.85	18.7%
	100.0%	100.1%		100.0%
Race:				
White	83.7%	87.1%	0.96	83.2%
Black	15.0%	8.8%	1.71	15.5%
Other	1.3%	4.2%	0.30	1.3%
	100.0%	100.1%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	40.4%	1.17	47.5%
Female	52.5%	59.6%	0.88	52.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

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