

Summary of State Findings, Spring 2006

Tennesseans doubtful that Legislature’s ethics will improve. Legislators probably will take vote-influencing bribes or gifts just as often as they did before the recent special session on ethics, 33% of Tennesseans predict. Another 17% think bribe-taking by legislators will grow more frequent, and 20% say they don’t know. Only 30% say bribes will grow less frequent. Similar misgivings about ethics in the U.S. Congress are apparent, too. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

Half disapprove of how governor is handling TennCare. Fifty-one percent of Tennesseans disapprove of how Gov. Phil Bredesen is handling TennCare, the state’s medical care program for the poor, disabled, and uninsurable. Nearly two-thirds (65%) suspect that either “only some” (42%) or “nearly none” (23%) of the almost 200,000 enrollees cut from TennCare will “find some other way of meeting their essential medical needs.” *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

Health No. 1 state issue again. As in our fall survey, health services and health insurance remain the No. 1 Tennessee problem, with 27% naming these issues in open-ended questions. In the fall, 29% agreed, a statistically insignificant difference. *(Contact: Robert Wyatt)*

Tennessee barometer trumps national reading. As in the fall, we reports two “barometer” indexes of perceptions of the overall state and national climate. This spring, the Tennessee index stands at 51, identical with the fall, while the national index is 37, up three points from fall. *(Contact: Robert Wyatt)*

Bredesen approval still high. Gov. Phil Bredesen’s approval stands at 54%, up an insignificant 2% from fall but down from 62% last spring. Less than one-quarter disapprove of his performance, but more than one in five (21%) say they simply do not know how he is doing. *(Contact: Robert Wyatt)*

Near majority satisfied with state conditions. Fully 47% are satisfied with the way things are going in Tennessee, down from 51% in the fall and 61% last spring. State scandals and TennCare may take their toll, but most damage occurred between this time last year and fall. *(Contact: Robert Wyatt)*

Plurality of Tennesseans rates state economy only fair. Fully 45% of Tennesseans rate the state’s economy only fair, although 33% score it good. *(Contact: Robert Wyatt)*

Half of Tennesseans are imports, mostly from Southeast & Midwest. The state has imported roughly half of its current population, most commonly within the last 13 years or so, and most commonly from the Southeastern United States. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

Details of State Findings, Spring 2006

Tennesseans doubtful that Legislature's ethics will improve

Legislators probably will take vote-influencing bribes just as often as they did before the recent special session on ethics, a third (33%) of Tennesseans predict. Another 17% estimate that bribe-taking by legislators actually will grow more frequent. A substantial fifth (20%) say they don't know, and only about a third (30%) say bribes will grow less frequent.

At present, about a third (32%) of state residents think that "most" legislators "accept bribes or gifts that affect their votes." A quarter (24%) put the figure at "about half," while 29% say "some," and 7% choose "hardly any." The rest refuse to answer or aren't sure.

Tennesseans' views on these matters are highly correlated with their overall opinion of the state Legislature. Among those who disapprove of the "job the Tennessee state Legislature is doing," for example, just under half (48%) think "most" legislators presently take bribes. By contrast, among Tennesseans who approve of the job the Legislature is doing, only about a quarter (26%) say "most" legislators presently take bribes.

Among those approving of the Legislature in general, self-described evangelical Christians living in West and Middle Tennessee are the most suspicious of legislators' integrity when it comes to accepting bribes. Similarly, 41% of those who disapprove of the Legislature in general think the level of bribe-taking will stay the same, compared to a smaller proportion (27%) of those who approve of the Legislature in general. Pessimism about reducing the frequency of bribes is highest among middle-aged Tennesseans who disapprove of the Legislature in general. Overall, just 34% of Tennesseans express approval of the job the Legislature is doing. Thirty-nine percent disapprove, and 26% don't know. The rest decline to answer.

Interestingly, general disapproval of the Legislature radiates outward from Metro Davidson County and the contiguous counties, where disapproval is highest, and then to the state's remaining regions, where disapproval diminishes, and the proportion choosing "don't know" rises more than the proportion expressing approval. General disapproval of the Legislature has remained unchanged since our November poll, which registered 34% approval of the Legislature. Last spring, approval of the Legislature stood at 45%.

Tennesseans express similar misgivings about the level of ethics in the U.S. Congress. Half or more of the people in Congress accept bribes or gifts that affect their votes, nearly two-thirds (62%) of Tennesseans say. Specifically, 39% of Tennesseans say that "most" people in Congress take bribes, and 23% put the figure at "about half." Another 27% say "some," and 5% choose "hardly any." The rest aren't sure.

Pessimism about Congress's ethics is greatest among Tennesseans from the left to the middle of the political spectrum, 49% of whom say that "most" members of Congress take bribes. Among politically right Tennesseans, just over a third (37%) say that "most" members of Congress take bribes. And among the politically right, those who watch television news seven days a week are more critical than are those who watch TV news less often.

Half disapprove of how governor is handling TennCare

About half (51%) of Tennesseans disapprove of how Gov. Phil Bredesen is handling TennCare, the state's medical care program for the poor, disabled, and uninsurable. Thirty-nine percent say they approve, and the rest aren't sure. Nearly two-thirds (65%) suspect that either "only some" (42%) or "nearly none" (23%) of the almost 200,000 enrollees cut from TennCare will "find some other way of meeting their essential medical needs." Eighteen percent say "most" will find a way to take care of their key medical needs, and 8% think "nearly all" will. The rest aren't sure. Last fall, 39% chose "nearly none," 36% "only some," 13% "most," and 3% "nearly all."

Approval of Bredesen's TennCare policies generally rises with education and income, two often-related factors in economic prosperity. Among Tennesseans who hold a college degree, for example, about half (51%) approve of Bredesen's TennCare actions compared to just under a third (32%) of Tennesseans without a college degree. And among the better educated, proportionally more men (62%) than women (43%) approve. Among the lesser educated, meanwhile, differences appear across race, with 37% of whites approving compared to just 13% of minorities. Similarly, 21% of state residents earning \$15,000 a year or less approve of Bredesen's TennCare policies. At the other end of the economic scale, just over half (52%) of those earning more than \$40,000 a year approve.

Estimates of how many people dropped from TennCare will be able to obtain medical care in some other way seems to be largely a function of factors represented by race and gender. Specifically, minorities are more likely than whites to estimate that "nearly none" of the disenrolled will find medical care elsewhere. And among whites, 30% of women choose "nearly none" compared to just 14% of men.

Health No. 1 state issue for blacks and whites

As in our fall survey, health services and health insurance remain the No. 1 Tennessee problem, with 27% naming these issues in open-ended questions. In the fall, 29% agreed, a statistically insignificant difference.

Education placed a distant second at 12%, followed by the economy at 10% and government corruption at 9%.

Unlike fall results, however, blacks, whites, and those from other racial groups concurred on health care as the No. 1 problem, suggesting convergence in opinions. Last spring, however, fully 34% of Tennesseans named health care the top issue, but 25% of blacks named education as the biggest issue, while only 10% named health care.

Tennessee barometer trumps national reading

As in the fall, the MTSU Poll is reporting two "barometer" indexes to measure citizen perceptions of the overall state and national climate. This spring, the Tennessee index stands once again at 51, identical with fall, while the national index sits at 37, up three points from fall.

The three-item barometric indices are calculated from attitudes toward the governor or the president, the state or the national economy, and "how things are going" in Tennessee or the nation. The top score is 100; an analysis of the individual items in the scale appears in following sections.

In both the state and the nation, the barometer is best predicted by political allegiances. For Tennessee, conservatives rate the state barometer 65, moderates and the far left 52, and liberals, the far right, and all others at 35. For the national barometer, ratings stand at 72 for Republicans, 32 for independents and others, and only 7 for Democrats.

These results indicate that those who rate the state of the state and nation high tend to inhabit separate economic and political worlds from the rest of the citizenry.

The MTSU Poll also reported a state barometer only in spring 2003, when the index stood at 53, not much of a difference from the current 51.

Bredesen approval still high despite TennCare, Highway Patrol woes

Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval stands at 54%, up an insignificant 2% from fall but down from 62% last spring. Less than one-quarter disapprove of Bredesen's performance, but more than one in five (21%) say they simply do not know how he is doing.

There are no major splits by political party, but there are huge splits in approval among men and women, with nearly two-thirds of men (65%) approving, contrasted with under half (47%) of women. Once gender is eliminated from the equation, figures reveal that fully half of whites but only about one-third (32%) of blacks approve of Bredesen's job performance. As noted above, race and gender were significant predictors of attitudes toward Bredesen's handling of TennCare, the state's health care program for the poor, disabled, and uninsurable.

Near majority satisfied with state conditions

Fully 47% are satisfied with the way things are going in Tennessee, down from 51% in the fall and 61% last spring. Although these findings indicate that state scandals and TennCare cuts are taking their toll, the majority of the damage seems to have been suffered between this time last year and the fall.

Republicans and Democrat-leaning independents are most satisfied (61%), followed by pure independents (41%), while Democrats and Republican-leaning independents are least satisfied (31%). This seems something of an irony for a state with a Democratic governor, until one factors in his popularity among business leaders and among Republicans.

A plurality of Tennesseans rates state economy only fair

Fully 45% of Tennesseans rate the state's economy only fair, although 33% score it good. Just 5% rate the state economy excellent, while 15% rate it poor. These figures are similar to economic ratings in the fall and last spring.

Not surprisingly, the income divide proved the best predictor of economic ratings. While 38% of those making \$25,000 or more rated the economy fair, only 27% of those making below \$25,000 agreed.

Half of Tennesseans are imports, mostly from Southeast & Midwest

The state has imported roughly half of its current population, most commonly within the last 13 years or so, and most commonly from the Southeastern – followed by the Midwestern – United States. Asked where they had moved to Tennessee from, nearly half (48%) named a state in the Southeast. A quarter (24%) said they had moved here from a state in the Midwest. About

10% arrived from the Northeast, 8% from the Southwest, 6% from the West Coast, and 4% from outside the United States.

Demographically, the strongest predictor of being an import rather than a native is education, perhaps owing to the increased mobility education tends to provide. Fifty-eight percent of Tennesseans who hold college degrees have moved into the state compared to 42% of those who have a high school education or less. And these “educated imports” are more common in the Tennessee counties contiguous to Metro Nashville than they are in both Metro Nashville itself and in the state’s remaining counties.

On general political measures, non-natives and natives appear identical. For example, 32% of natives describe themselves as Democrats, but so do 26% of non-natives, a statistically insignificant difference. Independents make up 26% of natives and 26% of non-natives, and Republicans account for 31% of natives and 38% of non-natives. Religiously, native Tennesseans are somewhat more likely to describe themselves as born-again or evangelical Christians (69%) compared to non-natives (57%), but evangelicals make up sizable majorities in both groups.

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: Evangelicalism in Tennessee

The label “Evangelical” is claimed by subgroups within a wide array of Christian types including Southern Baptists, Pentecostals, Catholics, Lutherans, and more. To complicate matters, many self-described Evangelicals attend non-denominational churches, and still others hold Evangelical beliefs and exhibit Evangelical behaviors without identifying with or even recognizing the term “Evangelical.” In short, Evangelicalism is an abstraction, and there is no perfect way to measure it. But whatever it is, Evangelicalism is a strong force in Tennessee politics, and an interpretation of Tennessee attitudes would be incomplete without some attempt to account for it.

The MTSU Poll assesses Evangelicalism by asking individuals whether they consider themselves an “Evangelical or born-again” Christian and also by measuring three themes often found in Evangelical belief and practice: Belief that the Bible is the “actual word of God” and should be “taken literally, word for word,” belief that “Jesus will return to earth and take all true Christians to heaven, leaving non-Christians here to face tribulation and the Antichrist,” and a personal history of having “tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior.” In Tennessee, all three measures correlate positively and strongly – although not perfectly – with self-identification as an Evangelical, and when one or

more of these measures emerges as a significant predictor, the predictor is assumed to accurately characterize the attitudes of Evangelicals.

Appendix C: Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 13-25, 2006 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 626 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	29.3%	22.7%	1.29	29.8%
35-49	29.9%	28.4%	1.05	29.6%
50-64	24.2%	29.5%	0.82	24.0%
65+	16.7%	19.4%	0.86	16.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		99.9%
Race:				
White	83.6%	85.7%	0.98	82.5%
Black	15.1%	9.1%	1.66	16.0%
Other	1.3%	5.2%	0.25	1.5%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	47.0%	1.01	46.9%
Female	52.5%	53.0%	0.99	53.1%
	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.