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**Tennesseans remain reluctant to accommodate illegal immigrants,
especially in the Midstate**

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – About half of Tennesseans oppose accommodating illegal immigrants with temporary work permits as “guest workers,” a tendency especially pronounced in Middle Tennessee, according to statewide poll results released today by Middle Tennessee State University.

But if such a program did exist, most state residents think those with temporary work permits should be allowed to work toward citizenship.

“Tennessee opinion on the issue is complex,” said Ken Blake, director of the poll. “The dominant opinion among Tennesseans is that letting illegal immigrants live and work here legally on a temporary basis is not a good idea. But they say that if we’re going to do it, we should also give such people a chance to become citizens. And compared to three years ago, opposition to a guest worker program may have declined a little bit.”

In the current survey, 50 percent of Tennesseans oppose letting illegal immigrants register for temporary legal status and employment as part of a guest worker program, the poll found. But the figure is lower than three years ago, when the Spring 2004 MTSU Poll found 56 percent of Tennesseans opposed to work permits for illegal immigrants. The six-percentage-point decrease in opposition between then and now lies within the overlap of the two polls’ error margins, but the decline may be evidence of a small downward trend in opposition.

In the current poll, only 41 percent support a guest worker program, and the remaining 10 percent aren’t sure.

But when asked to suppose that such a temporary worker program were created anyway, most (54 percent) say the program should allow illegal immigrants to work toward citizenship over a period of several years. Only 38 percent would oppose including a path to citizenship in a guest worker program if such a program were created. The remaining 8 percent aren’t sure.

For comparison, a national poll of registered voters conducted in November by Quinnipiac University found 65 percent support for a guest worker program, 32 percent opposition, and 3 percent undecided. Sixty-nine percent favored including a path to citizenship if a guest worker program were created. Twenty-seven percent disapproved, and 4 percent were undecided.

Residents of Middle Tennessee tend to express less support for accommodating illegal immigrants than do people living elsewhere in the state, the poll found, even when other demographic factors are held constant.

Tennesseans remain reluctant to accommodate illegal immigrants, p. 2

For instance, 46 percent of Middle Tennessee residents support including a path to citizenship in a guest worker program if one were set up. By contrast, 55 percent in East Tennessee favor a path to citizenship, and 68 percent in West Tennessee, although the difference between Middle and West Tennessee is not statistically significant.

Furthermore, the proportion of people who reject both a guest worker program and a path to citizenship if such a program were created is 40 percent in Middle Tennessee counties excluding Metro Nashville/Davidson and 23 percent elsewhere, including Metro Nashville/Davidson. Statewide, a little over a quarter of Tennesseans (29 percent) disapprove of both measures. Region makes no difference in attitudes toward a guest worker program.

“Opposition to accommodating illegal immigrants seems especially common in Middle Tennessee, particularly in the counties outside Davidson,” Blake said. “The poll didn’t probe reasons behind this regional variation. But it may be that the Nashville area’s relatively high level of immigration makes immigration generally more salient for Middle Tennesseans.”

Similar regional patterns emerge when Tennesseans are asked how important they regard the issue of illegal immigration. Fully 65 percent of Middle Tennesseans consider the issue either “extremely important” (34 percent) or “very important” (31 percent). By contrast, 58 percent of East Tennesseans call the issue “extremely important” (29 percent) or “very important” (29 percent). Among West Tennesseans, the figures are 30 percent “extremely important” and 25 percent “very important,” a total of 55 percent.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve seen this pattern of regional differences on questions related to immigration,” Blake said. “Polling we did in the fall of 2002 identified Middle Tennessee as the most anti-Hispanic region of the state.”

In that poll, which measured attitudes toward several racial, ethnic and immigrant groups without differentiating between legal and illegal immigrants, 41 percent of Middle Tennesseans said they thought Hispanics were “making life worse” in Tennessee. By contrast, 32 percent of West Tennesseans and 28 percent of East Tennesseans expressed the same view.

Tennesseans’ attitudes toward immigrants in general can be notably more positive than their attitudes toward “illegal” or “undocumented” immigrants. For instance, last fall’s MTSU Poll found that while 35 percent of Tennesseans thought “immigrants” made life in Tennessee worse, the figure jumped to 58 percent for “undocumented immigrants” and 60 percent for “illegal immigrants.”

Socioeconomic status also seems to factor into attitudes toward immigrants in Tennessee. In the 2002 MTSU Poll, anti-immigrant attitudes were most common among poorly educated Tennesseans, possibly because these individuals perceived themselves as competing with immigrants for jobs. And in the Spring 2004 poll, 65 percent of Tennesseans with a high school education or less said they thought immigrants reduced the availability of desirable jobs, but only 36 percent of Tennesseans with higher levels of education agreed.

The latest MTSU Poll, conducted earlier this month by students in Middle Tennessee State University’s College of Mass Communication under the direction of faculty specialists in public opinion research, contacted 554 randomly selected Tennessee adults by telephone, yielding an error margin of plus-or-minus four percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. Conducted twice a year since 1998, the MTSU Poll is sponsored by MTSU’s College of Mass Communication and the Office of Communication Research.

Tennesseans remain reluctant to accommodate illegal immigrants, p. 3