

Spring 2007 First Release: Is Tennessee turning Blue?

Clinton, Gore lead Giuliani, McCain in favorability, unfavorability. More Tennesseans express favorable ratings of Hillary Clinton and Al Gore than other presidential candidates, although Clinton and Gore also narrowly trail Newt Gingrich in disapproval. Clinton and Gore receive favorable approval by 42% of Tennesseans, followed by Rudy Giuliani at 39% and John McCain at 34%. But more Tennesseans disapprove (44%) of Clinton than approve (42%), while Gore's disapproval figure is 43% compared to his 42% approval. Fully 45% disapprove of Gingrich. Approval for Giuliani and McCain is less polarized. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt.*)

Bush's approval rating down, fewer say they are Republican. Given President Bush's falling approval ratings in Tennessee (34% vs. 42% a year ago), the unpopularity of the war in Iraq, and dissatisfaction with response to Hurricane Katrina, Tennessee – once solidly Republican – may be shifting toward the “blue” end of the spectrum. Also, in the fall of 2004 – when President Bush won handily – some 35% of Tennesseans identified themselves as Republicans, 29% as Democrats, and 23% as independents. This spring the results are 31% Republican, 33% Democrat, and 22% independent. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt.*)

No “surge” in approval of Bush's handling of Iraq. Fewer than one-third of Tennesseans (29%) approve of President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq, down from 40% in spring 2006 and 52% in spring 2004. Only 36% favor Bush's new plan for a troop “surge,” while 57% oppose. A majority (56%) of state residents also favor a Congressional resolution expressing opposition to Bush's troop increases. Again, polarization is evident. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt.*)

New state findings

Most favor boosting minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour. Raising the hourly minimum wage to \$7.25 receives support among a solid majority (58%) of Tennesseans. Another 18% would raise the minimum wage to \$7.25 but set the minimum wage at \$8.25 in Tennessee. Seven percent opt for leaving the minimum at its current \$5.15 level while raising it by a dollar to \$6.15 within Tennessee. Only 12% favor leaving the minimum wage at \$5.15. (*Contact: Ken Blake.*)

Should the state ban lighting up at work? Might as well ask, “smoking or non?” State residents divide evenly – and chiefly along tobacco use lines – regarding whether to ban smoking in workplaces, including bars and restaurants. Forty-one percent say the state should ban smoking in workplaces, but another 42% favor letting individual employers decide. Not surprisingly, people who have never smoked are more enthusiastic about a smoking ban than are people who presently smoke or have smoked in the past. (*Contact: Ken Blake*)

Opinion divided on whether to spend or save lottery scholarship surplus. Tennesseans divide just about evenly on what to do with the more than \$300 million surplus that has accumulated in the state's lottery-funded scholarship program. Nearly half (46%) would spend it on awarding more scholarship money now, but another 42% would rather hold it in reserve so the program could keep running if lottery earnings were to decline. (*Contact: Ken Blake*)

Details of Findings, Spring 2007

Clinton, Gore lead Giuliani, McCain in both favorability, unfavorability (contact Bob Wyatt at 615-477-8389)

More Tennesseans express favorable ratings of Sen. Hillary Clinton and former Vice President Al Gore than any other presidential candidate, although Clinton and Gore also narrowly trail former House Speaker Newt Gingrich in the percentage expressing disapproval.

Both Clinton and Gore receive favorable approval ratings by 42% of Tennesseans, followed by former New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani at 39% and Sen. John McCain at 34%. Former North Carolina Sen. John Edwards follows with 29% favorability, then Illinois Sen. Barack Obama with 26%. Former House Speaker Newt Gingrich – architect of the dramatic 1994 Republican takeover of Congress – bottoms out at 16%.

These findings not only indicate the increasing popularity of Democratic candidates and “blue state” values in Tennessee – a state considered solidly “red,” conservative, and Republican – but also suggest the depth of polarization the state’s politics. For example, more Tennesseans actually disapprove (44%) of Clinton than approve (42%), while Gore’s disapproval figure is 43% compared to his 42% approval. Fully 45% disapprove of Gingrich. By contrast, Republican frontrunners Giuliani and McCain receive 25% and 23% disapproval rating respectively, while Edwards and Obama draw 26% and 27% disapproval.

The colors blue and red are conventionally used to identify states the vote Democratic and Republican on election maps of the United States.

Although race is a significant predictor of favorability toward Barack Obama, race is an even greater predictor of favorability toward the best-known Democratic candidates. Thus, while 41% of African-Americans are favorable toward Obama compared with 32% of whites, 77% of African-Americans are favorable toward Clinton compared by to 35% of whites. And 75% of African-Americans are favorable toward Gore compared with 35% of whites.

Party identification is more important than race partly because, although two-thirds (66%) of African-Americans identify themselves as Democrats, Democrats of other races also are strong supporters of the leading candidates.

Bush’s approval rating down, fewer say they are Republican (contact Bob Wyatt at 615-477-8389)

Given President Bush’s falling approval ratings in Tennessee (34% vs. 42% a year ago), the unpopularity of the war in Iraq, and dissatisfaction with the federal response to Hurricane Katrina, Tennessee – once solidly Republican – may be shifting toward the “blue” end of the spectrum, indicating a swing toward the Democrats and more centrist or liberal values.

For example, now Sen. Bob Corker won a narrow election over former U.S. Rep. Harold Ford Jr. in November by 51% to 48%. Had Ford won, he would have become the South’s first popularly elected African-American senator.

A further indication of the shift is that, in the fall of 2004 – when President Bush won handily in Tennessee with 57% of the votes – some 35% of Tennesseans identified themselves as Republicans, 29% as Democrats, and 23% as independents. This spring the results are 31% Republican, 33% Democrat, and 22% independent. Although fairly small, the trend favors Democrats. Most independents hold political values somewhere between Republican and Democratic positions on political and social issues.

Of course, Tennesseans are deeply polarized along party and liberal-conservative lines when it comes to presidential candidate favorability. While 71 percent of Democrats and 27% of independents and other voters approve of Clinton, only 12% of Republicans approve. For Gore, 67% of Democrats, 40% of independents, and just 16% of Republicans approve. It is interesting to note that Gore runs stronger among independents than Clinton.

Ratings of Republican frontrunner Rudy Giuliani are not nearly so polarized, with 56% of Republicans, 34% of independents, 26% of Democrats favorable. McCain's favorability is even less polarized, with 43% favorability from both Republicans and independents and 23% from Democrats.

Race is particularly important in determining party identification, with two-thirds (66%) of African-Americans designating themselves as Democrats. But among whites and those of other races, just over one-fourth (27%) say they are Democrats. In our survey, 82% identified themselves as white, 16% as black or African-American, and 2% as other races.

No "surge" in approval of President Bush's handling of Iraq

(contact Bob Wyatt at 615-477-8389)

Fewer than one-third of Tennesseans (29%) approve of President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq, down from 40% in spring 2006 and 52% in spring 2004. By contrast, only 36% favor Bush's new plan for a troop "surge," while 57% oppose.

A full majority (56%) of state residents also favor a Congressional resolution expressing opposition to Bush's troop increases – a measure that passed the House 246-182 but fell four votes short of preventing a Republican filibuster in the Senate, passing 56-34.

However, Tennesseans give far lower support to a Congressional resolution that would actually block the deployment of more troops, with 43% favoring and 48% opposing.

A majority (51%) now consider sending troops to Iraq a mistake, though 43% feel otherwise. In spring 2006, just 48% felt sending troops was a mistake. The number thinking that sending troops was a mistake stood at 44% in spring 2005.

Again, polarization by political party is evident. A majority of (58%) Republicans approve of Bush's handling of Iraq, but 94% of Democrats and 71% of Independents disapprove. Concerning the troop surge, fully two-thirds (66%) of Republicans approve, while 84% of Democrats and 56% of independents oppose.

Concerning a non-binding resolution opposing the troop surge, Democrats favor by 82% and independents favor by 57% while Republicans oppose by 72%. For Congressional action blocking a surge, a strong Republican majority (78%) opposed the move; independents are split 44% for and against, and 59% of Democrats favor a blockage.

When assessing whether sending troops into Iraq was a mistake, 80% of Democrats and 52% of independents and other votes believe that it was a mistake, but only 21% of Republicans agree.

Most favor boosting minimum wage to \$7.25 an hour

(contact Ken Blake at 615-210-6187)

Raising the hourly minimum wage to \$7.25 receives support among a solid majority (58%) of Tennesseans. Another 18% would go a step further, raising the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 but setting the minimum wage at \$8.25 in Tennessee. Seven percent opt for leaving the federal minimum at its current \$5.15 level while raising it by a dollar to \$6.15 within Tennessee. Only 12% favor leaving the minimum wage at \$5.15. The rest don't know or decline to answer.

Generally, support for raising the minimum wage increases as political identity moves from right to left. For example, over a quarter (27%) of "strong" Republicans favor leaving the minimum wage at \$5.15 compared to just 2% of "strong" Democrats. Among those gravitating more toward the political center, women are more likely than men to favor a higher minimum wage.

Behind party identification, race is a powerful predictor, with significantly more minorities favoring a minimum wage boost (63%) than whites (56%). Also, more minorities (34%) than whites (15%) favor a boost to \$7.25 elsewhere and \$8.25 in Tennessee. Among whites, a similar division occurs across income levels. Support for raising the minimum wage to \$7.25 everywhere is actually higher (60%) among those earning more than \$25,000 a year in total household income than among those earning less, only 49% of whom favor a minimum wage set at \$7.25. But the difference occurs mainly because these poorer whites are more likely (30%) than wealthier whites (11%) to favor raising the federal minimum wage to \$7.25 and then setting it at \$8.25 within Tennessee. Thus, in the broader trend, poorer Tennesseans want a higher minimum wage more so than do wealthier Tennesseans.

No regional differences were apparent in these attitudes. In other words, West, Middle, and East Tennesseans hold equivalent attitudes on the question.

Should the state ban lighting up at work? Might as well ask, "smoking or non?"

(contact Ken Blake at 615-210-6187)

Tennesseans divide evenly – and chiefly along tobacco use lines – regarding whether to ban smoking in workplaces, including bars and restaurants. Forty-one percent of state residents say the state should ban smoking in workplaces, but another 42% favor letting individual employers decide whether to allow smoking. Another 14% favor letting local governments decide, and the rest don't know or aren't sure.

Not surprisingly, people who have never smoked are more enthusiastic about a state smoking ban than are people who presently smoke or have smoked in the past. Among the 51% of Tennesseans who say they have never smoked, well over half (57%) favor a state ban on smoking in workplaces. Only 25% favor leaving the choice up to individual employers, and 15% favor letting local governments decide. The rest don't know or decline to answer.

By contrast, among the 24% of Tennesseans who either smoke regularly or are trying to quit smoking, only 13% favor a state ban on smoking. Most smokers (70%) favor letting individual employers decide, and 12% would let local governments decide. The 25% of Tennesseans who describe themselves as former smokers occupy something of a middle ground, with 36% supporting a state ban, 47% supporting letting employers decide, and 12% letting local

governments decide. Among these individuals, females tend to favor a state ban, while males tend to opt for letting employers decide. Behind smoking habits, church attendance, income and education all play into attitudes toward a smoking ban, with support for a ban highest among individuals who attend church regularly, have higher incomes, and have spent at least some time in college.

State opinion also fragments regarding whether to raise cigarette taxes and, if so, how to spend the resulting revenue. Just over a quarter (29%) favor raising cigarette taxes and spending the revenue on cutting sales taxes on food. Another 34% would raise cigarette taxes and spend the funds on increasing education funding, while 25% would leave cigarette taxes at their current level, and 5% would lower cigarette taxes.

Among smokers – both regular smokers and those trying to quit – a plurality (40%) favor leaving cigarette taxes at their current level. Just over a quarter (25%) would raise cigarette taxes to fund education, and 17% would raise the cigarette tax to cut the sales tax on food. For comparison, ex-smokers and those who have never smoked divide about evenly between raising the cigarette tax to fund education (36%) and raising it to fund a cut in the food tax (34%). Nineteen percent would leave cigarette taxes where they are, and 3% would lower them. Here, age makes a difference, with older nonsmokers and ex-smokers preferring a cut in the food tax, and younger nonsmokers and ex-smokers favoring more funding for education.

Opinion divided on whether to spend or save lottery scholarship surplus
(contact Ken Blake at 615-210-6187)

Tennesseans divide just about evenly on what to do with the more than \$300 million surplus that has accumulated in the state's lottery-funded scholarship program. Nearly half (46%) would spend it on awarding more scholarship money now, but another 42% would rather hold it in reserve so the program could keep running if lottery earnings were to decline. Another 10% don't know, and the rest decline to answer.

Among state residents age 64 or younger, 49% would spend the surplus on awarding more scholarship money now. But only 34% of those age 65 or older would spend the money now. Among these older state residents, a 43% plurality would save the money compared to 41% of those who are younger.

If the money were to be spent on providing more scholarship money now, a majority (57%) would do so by giving more money to those who qualify for a scholarship under the program's existing academic standards. Under a third, by contrast, favor lowering the current academic standards so that more Tennesseans could qualify for and keep a scholarship through the program. These attitudes are consistent across all major demographic subgroups measured by the survey.

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. 6-17, 2007 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 554 people age 18 or older chosen at random from the state population. The poll has an estimated error margin of \pm about 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:

The MTSU Poll State Findings, Spring 2007, p. 7

	Census	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	28.9%	21.0%	1.38	29.9%
35-49	29.6%	26.5%	1.12	29.4%
50-64	24.8%	32.1%	0.77	23.7%
65+	16.8%	20.4%	0.82	17.1%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.1%
Race:				
White	83.6%	88.3%	0.95	82.6%
Black	15.1%	7.3%	2.07	15.8%
Other	1.3%	4.4%	0.30	1.6%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	52.3%	0.91	46.8%
Female	52.5%	47.7%	1.10	53.2%
	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.