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TENNESSEANS PICK MCCAIN OVER OBAMA IN PRESIDENTIAL MATCH-UP

Poll finds Hillary Clinton comes closer to tying McCain

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – Republican primary frontrunner Sen. John McCain leads his Democratic counterpart, Sen. Barack Obama, by double digits in a hypothetical match-up asking which of the two candidates Tennesseans would like to see occupy the Oval Office next year, a new poll by Middle Tennessee State University shows.

Half (50%) of Tennessee adults say they would vote for McCain over Obama in a presidential contest between the two. Just over a third (36%) would choose Obama over McCain.

Meanwhile, New York Sen. Hillary Clinton, whom Tennessee Democrats picked over Obama in the state's primary but who trails Obama nationally, fares somewhat better against McCain in Tennessee than Obama does. In a hypothetical contest between McCain and Clinton, 45% of Tennessee adults choose McCain, and 38% choose Clinton.

"These findings may add to concerns some Democrats are expressing about Obama's crossover appeal in states like Tennessee that have voted Republican in recent presidential elections," Blake said. "At least so far, Obama hasn't lured many Republicans away from McCain. What's more, he loses a plurality of independents to McCain and even a fifth of Democrats. Of course, there's a lot of campaigning left to do. And how the economy plays out – and who gets the blame or credit for it – will have a big effect on the election."

The spring political survey also found that the majority of Tennesseans favor requiring a "B" or better in college for a lottery scholarship. Most (65%) approve of the current requirement that students maintain a "B" average or better in college to keep a lottery-funded college scholarship.

Interestingly, Blake said, supportive percentages shift slightly depending on how the issue is framed:

If asked whether the requirement should be, "the same for everyone, regardless of income," or "lower for the poor than for the rich," 69% say it should be the same for everyone, and 25% choose lower for the poor. But when we asked whether the requirement should be, "the same for everyone, regardless of income," or "higher for the rich than for the poor," significantly more (79%) say the requirement should be the same for everybody, and just 16% favor a difference based on income.

"The governor's hope of lowering scholarship standards for poorer students faces an uphill battle in terms of popular support," Blake said. "Tennesseans seem to respond most favorably to the idea of standards that are the same for everybody. But how the issue gets framed in public discussion could make a difference."

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MTSU spring political poll results, CONT'D

Other poll findings include:

Immigration attitudes soften dramatically. Fully 47% support starting a guest worker program for illegal immigrants, and 63% would support a citizenship path if it then became law. Both percentages have climbed substantially since last year. Half agree that immigrants take jobs nobody wants. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt*)

Offer state-supported pre-kindergarten to all children, most Tennesseans say. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Tennesseans favor opening the state's pre-kindergarten program to all children in the state. Just 16% support leaving it limited to poorer children only. (*Contact: Ken Blake*)

Most favor some restriction on abortion. Most (53%) state residents favor some restriction on abortion. A fifth favor no restriction, and a quarter favor an absolute ban. (*Contact: Ken Blake*)

Perceptions of Iraq war marginally less negative. A majority (51%) of Tennesseans say that the war in Iraq is going badly, down 3% from spring. A firm majority (56%) say sending troops was a mistake, though only 25% of Republicans agree. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt*)

Evangelicalism key to opposing gay marriage. Two-thirds (66%) still oppose gay marriage, a figure that has held fairly constant for the last five years. Opposition is 91% among strong evangelicals. Education level is inversely related to evangelicalism. (*Contact: Bob Wyatt*)

MTSU Poll results have shown a high degree of consistency with actual election outcomes since 2002, the first election year in which the poll was fielded using a statewide sample. During that time, the poll has measured state opinion in one general presidential election, two gubernatorial races and one U.S. Senate contest. In each instance, the state-level election results have fallen within the poll results' error margin.

The current poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 11 - 23 by students in the College of Mass For nearly 10 years, the Survey Group at MTSU has been providing independent, non-partisan, and unbiased public opinion data regarding major social, political, and ethical issues affecting Tennessee. The poll began in 1998 as a measure of public opinion in the 39 counties comprising Middle Tennessee and began measuring public opinion statewide in 2001. Learn more at www.mtsusurveygroup.org

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