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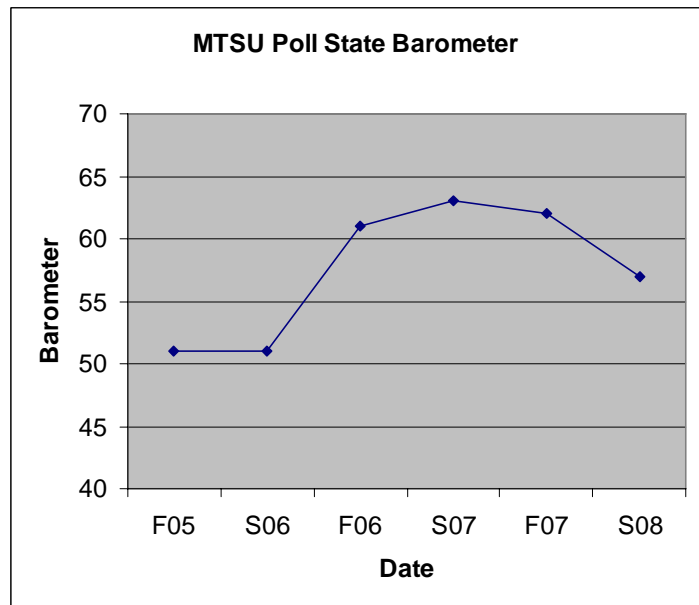
Satisfaction with Tennessee conditions drops to four-year low

MURFREESBORO, Tenn. – With a credit crisis and other economic indicators declining, satisfaction with conditions in Tennessee has dropped for the second time in a row and by the largest margin in four years, the latest MTSU Poll State Barometer shows.

Worries about the economy - especially among the state's poorer and poorly educated residents - appear to be driving the decline. Economic concerns for such people also may have boosted feelings that the economy is the most important issue in the presidential election and the most important problem facing the state.

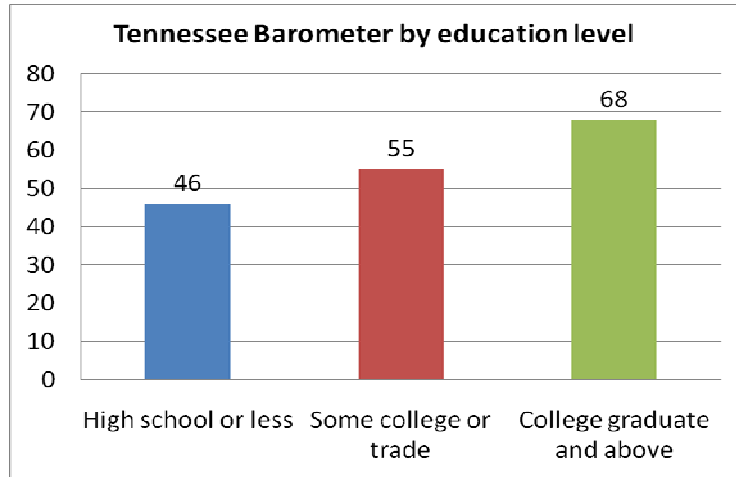
“Life is good for those standing on the top rung of the state’s economy,” said Dr. Robert Wyatt, director of communication research at MTSU. “On the lower rungs, though, the climate is turning rapidly grim for many, with issues like health care, financial hard times and crime posing more significant problems. Unlike most ladders, this one is shakiest and scariest at the bottom rather than the top.”

The MTSU Poll State Barometer now stands at 57 out of 100, down from 62 just last fall. Computed from measures of three interrelated attitudes – approval of the governor, perceived outlook for the state’s economy, and evaluation of the direction the state seems to be going – the barometer provides a general picture of Tennesseans’ satisfaction with conditions in the state. The barometer’s first reading, taken in fall 2005, stood at 51 and stayed there through spring 2006. It soared to 61 in fall 2006 – paralleling a stock market boom – then edged further up in spring 2007. The index then declined slightly last fall ahead of the precipitous drop observed this spring.



Education makes big difference in outlook

The barometer's present reading is clearly tied to economic security and well-being. For example, among those with high-school educations or less, the barometer averages 46. Among those with some college or trade school, the barometer rises to 55. And for those with college degrees or above, the barometer stands at a sunny 68. A nearly identical trend appears across income levels.

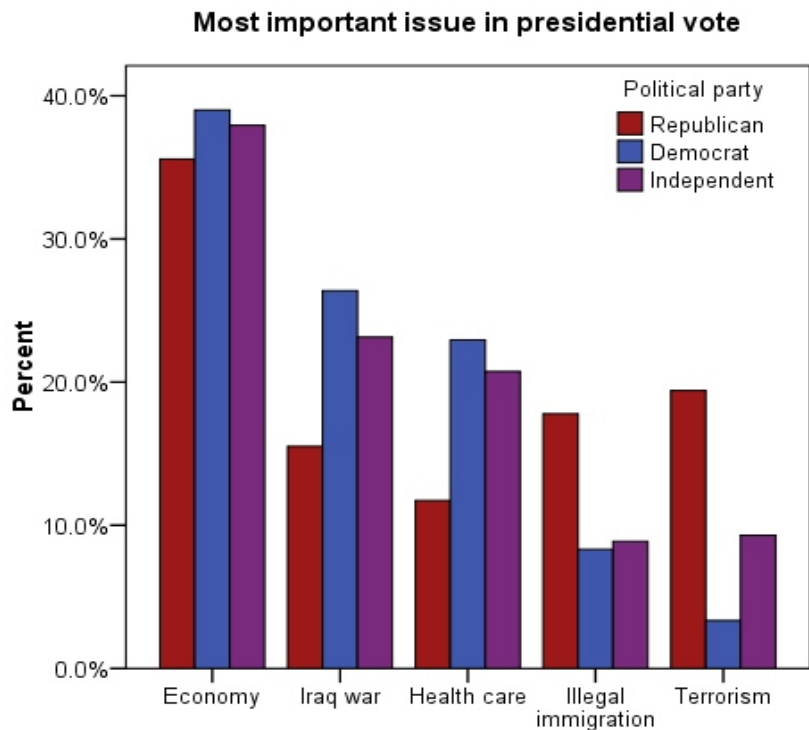


Furthermore, all three of the barometer's component measures - approval of the governor, optimism about the state's economy, and general satisfaction with how things are going in the state - rise significantly with both education and income.

Economic concerns factor into presidential race.

The economic worries reflected in the barometer appear to be influencing Tennesseans's attitudes toward the presidential election. The economy tops a list of issues that Tennesseans consider most important in the upcoming presidential election. A plurality of 34% say the economy will be the most important issue to them when they decide how to vote for president. Nineteen percent choose the Iraq war, and 16% choose healthcare. Another 10% choose illegal immigration, 8% choose terrorism, and 10% name some other issue including abortion, gay marriage, and morality. The rest aren't sure.

Democrats, independents, and Republicans all pick the economy as the top issue – a notably rare cross-party consensus on what matters most. But political party heavily influences how the remaining issues are ranked. Among Democrats and independents, for example, the Iraq war and healthcare tie for second place behind the economy, while illegal immigration and terrorism place third. Among Republicans, by contrast, the



Iraq war shares second place with illegal immigration and terrorism, and healthcare runs third.

“Interestingly, while the economy dominates as the election's most important issue for Tennesseans, the race's outcome here may swing on other issues like the Iraq war and healthcare,” said Dr. Ken Blake, professor of journalism at MTSU and director of the MTSU Poll. “On these issues, the independent voters whom the eventual presidential hopefuls will try to woo seem to share the Democratic agenda more than the Republican agenda.”

Economic disaffection benefits Clinton over Obama

Dissatisfaction with conditions in Tennessee seems to benefit Hillary Clinton more than Barack Obama, her rival for the Democratic presidential nomination. In a head-to-head matchup between Clinton and presumptive Republican nominee John McCain, 46% of those registering lower on the MTSU Poll State Barometer would vote for Clinton, and 34% would vote for McCain, while among those registering higher on the barometer, half (50%) would vote for McCain, and just 35% would vote for Clinton. By contrast, in a head-to-head matchup between Obama and McCain, those at the low end of the barometer split about evenly between Obama (41%) and McCain (44%), while those at the high end of the barometer are much more likely to favor McCain (55%) than Obama (30%).

“Dissatisfied Tennesseans like Clinton, but they're not so sure about Obama,” Blake said. “And, of course, satisfied Tennesseans like McCain more than either Clinton or Obama.”

Overall, the spring MTSU Poll found that 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, 9% would vote for neither one, and the rest aren't sure. 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. Fourteen percent say they would vote for neither one, and the rest aren't sure. The gap between Clinton and McCain narrows substantially among likely voters, while McCain's lead over Obama changes little among likely voters.

Economic well-being also influences state-level agenda

As for the state-level political agenda, education outpaced healthcare and health insurance issues as the state's No. 1 problem overall, but the results are due to the priority put on education by upper income groups.

This spring, 20% volunteered that education was the state's biggest challenge in an open-ended question, followed by healthcare (18%) and the economy (16%). It is fair to

say that, not only are these three issues interrelated, but they are so close together that the difference in percentages may be due to chance alone.

Family income is an important predictor of how the No. 1 problem is viewed, and our data also indicate the extent of families living in poverty or with family incomes below \$50,000.

For families with incomes less than \$15,000 each year (27% of our sample), health issues were No. 1 (17%), followed by the economy (15%), education (15%), and crime (12%). One step up the income scale (those making \$15,000-25,000 or 8% of our sample), the economy was No. 1, followed by crime (15%), healthcare (14%), and taxes (14%). With the \$40,000-50,000 group (26% of sample), the economy again places first (19%), then healthcare (18%), education (14%), and immigration (12%). Among the top income group (over \$50,000; 40% of sample), education overwhelmingly outpaces other issues (30%), followed by healthcare (18%) and the economy (15%). The same shift from economic to educational concerns happens as level of education rises.

The implications are clear: health and the economy dominate on the lower end of the income scale. Where money is more plentiful, education – viewed arguably as a key to a successful future – emerges supreme.

For the record, in last fall's MTSU Poll, 22% named health insurance and health services as the No. 1 problem – down from 29% in spring 2007. However, in fall 2006, just 19% mentioned health care. Thus, we have returned closer to 2006 levels, an effect probably related to the souring economy.

Support widespread for higher minimum wage

Those at the top, middle and bottom of the state's economy do seem to agree on one economy-related point: Tennessee should join neighbors North Carolina, Missouri and Arkansas in setting a state minimum wage that exceeds the federal minimum wage.

Overall, 59% of state residents say Tennessee's minimum wage should be greater than the federal minimum. The majority persists at all income levels but hovers at 50 percent for college graduates compared to 62% of those without a college degree. Only about a third (33%) say the state should use the federal minimum wage, and the rest aren't sure.

But these opinions are politically polarized. Three-fourths (75%) of Democrats favor a state minimum wage that exceeds the federal minimum wage. By contrast, 58% of independents and just 37% of Republicans favor a higher state minimum wage.

Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 11-23 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 577 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	28.7%	16.4%	1.75	30.4%
35-49	29.0%	25.7%	1.13	28.5%
50-64	25.4%	33.0%	0.77	25.5%
65+	16.9%	25.0%	0.68	15.6%
	100.0%	100.1%		100.0%
Race:				
White	83.5%	88.3%	0.95	82.1%
Black	15.2%	7.2%	2.11	16.6%
Other	1.3%	4.5%	0.29	1.3%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
Gender:				
Male	47.5%	48.3%	0.98	48.4%
Female	52.5%	51.7%	1.02	51.6%
	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.