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## Summary of Political Findings, Spring 2008

**Tennesseans pick McCain over Obama in presidential match-up.** Republican primary frontrunner Sen. John McCain leads his Democratic counterpart, Sen. Barak Obama, by double digits in a hypothetical presidential contest. Hillary Clinton comes closer to tying McCain. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**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)*

**Majority favor requiring a "B" or better in college for a lottery scholarship.** Most Tennesseans (65%) approve of the current requirement that college students maintain a "B" average or better to keep a lottery-funded scholarship. *(Contact: Ken Blake)*

**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 wealthier children in addition to poorer ones. Just 16% support leaving it limited to poorer children. *(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 slightly less negative.** A majority (51%) of Tennesseans say that Iraq war is going badly, down 3% from spring. A firm majority (56%) say sending troops was a mistake, though just 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)*

## Details of Findings

### MTSU Poll Political Report, Spring 2008

#### Tennesseans pick McCain over Obama in presidential match-up (Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

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.

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, and the rest aren't sure.

McCain's lead persists among "likely voters," defined as Tennesseans who claim to be registered to vote, say they voted in Tennessee's fall 2006 U.S. Senate race, and describe themselves as very likely to vote in the 2008 presidential race. Among poll respondents meeting those criteria, McCain led Obama 53% to 37%, with just 5% saying they would vote for neither, and the rest expressing uncertainty.

Republican Mike Huckabee, who won Tennessee's Republican primary but trails McCain at the national level, outpolls Obama as well, although less handily. Forty seven percent of all Tennessee adults would vote for Huckabee over Obama, while 39% would pick Obama over Huckabee. About 8% would choose neither man, and the rest aren't sure. Among likely voters in Tennessee, 50% would choose Huckabee, 40% would choose Obama, 5% would choose neither one, and the rest aren't sure.

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. Fourteen percent say they would vote for neither, and the rest aren't sure.

While there is a 92% chance that these poll results truly indicate a McCain lead over Clinton, there is a corresponding 8% chance of a "statistical dead heat," meaning a situation in which the difference between two percentages in a poll has more to do with random sampling variation than with an actual difference in the population the poll represents. Many pollsters characterize a race as too close to call if the probability of a statistical dead heat is as little as 6%, even though there is a corresponding 94% probability in such cases that the poll results reflect a real difference between the candidates.

McCain's lead over Clinton shrinks considerably among likely voters, 45% of whom choose McCain and 41% of whom choose Clinton, with 10% choosing neither and the rest unsure. Given the narrower gap between Clinton and McCain among these likely

voters, the chance of a statistical dead heat rises to about 36%, and the chance that McCain truly leads Clinton among these likely voters drops to 64%."

Pitted against Republican Mike Huckabee, Clinton attracts 39% of Tennessee adults, while Huckabee attracts 45%, indicating about a 9% chance of a statistical dead heat. Twelve percent would vote for neither Clinton nor Huckabee, and the rest aren't sure. The percentages are roughly the same among likely voters.

McCain's lead over Obama in Tennessee appears to stem partly from McCain's ability to draw a plurality (46%) of independents and even about a fifth (21%) of Democrats in a one-on-one contest with Obama. And given McCain's backing by a strong majority (85%) of the state's Republicans, there is little evidence in Tennessee of the conservative mutiny against McCain that some are predicting at the national level.

Beneath party identification, Tennessee's familiar political fault lines defined by race and religion come into play, with most (73%) African-Americans and other minorities favoring Obama, the Democrat, and most (55%) whites supporting McCain, the Republican, especially whites who are also better-educated and describe themselves as evangelical Christians.

In a contest with Clinton, McCain draws just 11% of Democrats compared to Clinton's 77%. He and Clinton split independents evenly with about 40% each, and McCain has 84% of Republican voters compared to Clinton's 7%. Clearly, a Clinton-McCain race would potentially be more polarizing than an Obama-McCain race. Behind party identification, most (57%) African-Americans favor Clinton, while a plurality (48%) of whites favor McCain, especially those with college degrees. Gender is far from the strongest predictor of preferences in a McCain-Clinton matchup, but it does make a difference. Among men, 48% choose McCain, 32% choose Clinton, 17% choose neither, and the rest aren't sure. Among women, the split is more balanced, with 43% choosing McCain, 43% choosing Clinton, 10% choosing neither, and the rest unsure.

**Immigration attitudes soften dramatically; linked to economic issues, education**  
(Contact: Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

A near majority of Tennesseans (47%) today support starting a guest worker program for illegal immigrants, a significant increase from 40% in our spring 2007 poll. Today, 42% oppose such a program, with 10% unsure, while a year ago, opposition was 50%. In spring 2004, only 35% supported work permits for illegal immigrants as suggested by President Bush. This trend reversal is quite impressive.

And should a guest-worker program be passed into law, nearly two-thirds (63%) would support a path to citizenship for guest workers, up from 54% a year ago.

Support for guest worker programs is tied closely to economic prospects. Most in the very lowest income groups – \$15,000 or under – prove even more supportive (53%) of a guest worker program than those making above \$25,000 (48%). Those making

\$15,000-25,000 provide the least support (23%), and fully 65% oppose a guest worker program. Here, economic competition may be at issue.

Income is also the best predictor of support for a citizenship path for guest workers, but here opposition of the middle group drops out. Thus, a sizable 73% of those making \$40,000 or less support a citizenship path, while 58% of those with income levels above \$40,000 agree. Here, one may argue that sympathy among lower income groups overcomes fear of economic competition.

This historic softening of attitudes toward illegal immigrants may be due to many factors including: greater familiarity with - and hence comfort around - such groups and publicity surrounding the fact that sufficient numbers of workers for some jobs such as storm cleanup have been hard to find in areas that have cracked down on undocumented immigrants.

Indeed, when Tennesseans are asked what kinds of jobs illegal immigrants take, fully half (50%) agree that they take jobs nobody wants, while just 36% say they take jobs Americans need.

Here, as with other economic issues, education level becomes significant. Fully 56% of those with college educations or greater say that immigrants take unwanted jobs, while only 40% with high school educations or less agree. Thus, the effect of education on wellbeing is again obvious.

About a third of Tennesseans (32%) consider illegal immigration "extremely" important to them personally. Twenty-eight percent consider it "very" important, 24% "moderately" important, 9% "slightly" important, and 7% "not important at all." It is unclear what motivations may lie behind considering illegal immigration personally important or not.

### **Majority favor requiring a "B" or better in college for a lottery scholarship**

*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Most Tennesseans (65%) approve of the current requirement that college students maintain a "B" average or better to keep a lottery-funded scholarship. But just over a quarter (27%) think the standard should be somewhere below a "B," and 5% think the standard should be higher than a "B." The rest aren't sure.

Furthermore, a majority think the requirement should be the same for everybody, regardless of income. But the exact percentage varies, depending on which of two logically equivalent question wordings is used. 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% opt for an income-based standard. But 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 differential standard based on income. The finding indicates that Governor Phil Bredesen's hope of

setting a lower standard for the poor faces an uphill fight in Tennessee, and its chances may depend partly on how the issue is framed in public discourse.

Attitudes about lottery scholarship requirements break most strongly along income lines, with over a third (39%) of Tennesseans earning \$50,000 in household income per year or less favoring a standard somewhere below a "B" compared to under a quarter (23%) of those with higher annual household incomes.

**Offer state-supported pre-kindergarten to all children, most Tennesseans say**  
*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Tennesseans favor opening the state's pre-kindergarten program to wealthier children in addition to poorer ones. Just 16% support leaving it limited to poorer children only, and 17% aren't sure. About 2% say the state should not offer pre-kindergarten programs at all.

Self-described conservatism makes a difference, with 61% of conservatives supporting pre-kindergarten for all children compared to 69% of liberals and those in the middle of the political spectrum.

Gov. Phil Bredesen has proposed offering state-sponsored pre-kindergarten education to all children in the state, regardless of income. Among conservatives, less-educated males are the least supportive, and less-educated females are the most supportive.

**Most favor some restriction on abortion**  
*(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)*

Most (53%) state residents think abortion should be legal "only under certain circumstances." Just under one in five (18%) think it should be legal "under any circumstances," and roughly a quarter (24%) think it should be "illegal in all circumstances." These percentages are virtually identical both to those observed last fall and also to those observed in fall 2005.

Tennesseans who fall middle to left on the political spectrum are less supportive of restricting abortion than Tennesseans who fall middle to right. Behind political orientation, education becomes important, with 12% of Tennesseans with no college experience favoring unrestricted access to abortion compared to 21% of those with at least some college education. And among the college-educated, support for restricting abortion increases with evangelical Christian identity.

**Perceptions of Iraq war marginally less negative, but most say war a mistake**  
*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

A majority (51%) of Tennesseans say that the war in Iraq is going badly, with 23% choosing very badly and 28% moderately badly. The total rating the war as going badly is down marginally from 54% in our fall poll. Just 37% now say it is going moderately

well, as opposed to 36% in the fall, and 6% selected well. Thus, most of the shift is from very badly to moderately badly, hardly an affirmation despite news of some successes in areas of Iraq.

Political party is the major underlying factor, with 45% of Democrats saying very badly and 32% moderately badly. Independents and others choose 22% and 33% very and moderately badly. But only 5% of Republicans select very badly and 17% moderately badly, while a majority (62%) chooses moderately well – compared to 32% independents and 17% Democrats.

A similar spread is found on whether sending troops to Iraq was a mistake, with a firm majority (56%) saying it was a mistake, as opposed to 44% who think it was not.

Political party again emerges as the important predictor, with 86% of Democrats saying yes, while 65% of independents agree. Among Republicans, only 25% say it was a mistake, and 41% of a small contingent of “others” (10% of sample) say it was a mistake.

Our sample is rather evenly divided by party identification, with 32% selecting Republican, 30% Democrat, 25% independent, and 10% other. The rest refused or had no opinion.

### **Evangelicalism key to opposing gay marriage**

*(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)*

Fully two-thirds (66%) of Tennesseans still oppose gay marriage, while only about one quarter (24%) approve – figures that have held fairly constant for the last five years.

The strength of Tennesseans’ evangelical beliefs – measured by a 0-5 index composed of questions about being born again, evangelizing others, belief in the Rapture, and degree of Biblical literalism – is key to these findings.

Those scoring 0 on the scale (15% of the sample) approve gay marriage by 57%, while 35% disapprove. But pluralities or outright majorities of those scoring 1 or greater disapprove by various degrees. Just a score of 1 brings disapproval to 48%, while a score of 2 or 3 raises that to 66%, and any score greater than 3 increases disapproval to 91%.

Thus, only those who disavow being born again, who regard the bible mostly as fable, who never try to convert others, and who reject the Rapture approve of gay marriage by a majority.

Those scoring low on evangelicalism may, however, consider themselves Christian. The unchurched and Roman Catholics scored about 1.6 on the scale; United Methodists and other “mainline” Protestants scored 2.2; other Protestants and Disciples scored 2.7,

“other” Baptists and Churches of Christ scored 3.1, and Southern Baptists led with 3.4 out of a maximum of 6 points and a minimum of 0.

If denominationalism is ignored, education becomes the best predictor of evangelicalism, with high school graduates or less at 2.7, compared to those with some college or trade or more at 2.1.

### 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  $\pm 4$  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
<b>Age:</b>				
<b>18-34</b>	28.7%	16.4%	1.75	30.4%
<b>35-49</b>	29.0%	25.7%	1.13	28.5%
<b>50-64</b>	25.4%	33.0%	0.77	25.5%
<b>65+</b>	16.9%	25.0%	0.68	15.6%
	100.0%	100.1%		100.0%
<b>Race:</b>				
<b>White</b>	83.5%	88.3%	0.95	82.1%
<b>Black</b>	15.2%	7.2%	2.11	16.6%
<b>Other</b>	1.3%	4.5%	0.29	1.3%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%
<b>Gender:</b>				
<b>Male</b>	47.5%	48.3%	0.98	48.4%
<b>Female</b>	52.5%	51.7%	1.02	51.6%
	100.0%	100.0%		100.0%

Small variations in reported percentages (1% or less) sometimes result from rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights.