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MTSU Poll Economic Report, Spring 2010

Politics predicts national economic worry; age, income predict real suffering.

Republicans have a lock hold on worry about the national economy, with 43 percent very worried about national economic prospects over the next few years and another 40 percent somewhat worried. By contrast, just about one-fourth of Democrats (24 percent) are very worried, though nearly half (48 percent) are somewhat worried. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

Tennesseans want the state to be generous to students, the needy. Despite a conservative reputation, a plurality of Tennesseans generally favors more state spending for education and those who need extraordinary levels of help. By contrast, new highway construction and law enforcement fall nearer the bottom as priorities. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

National-mood barometer drops since 2009 polls, political polarization extreme.

Even as the recession eases technically, economic prospects appear grim in Tennessee, returning citizens' perception of the national mood to 21 out of 100, down from 28 in our spring and fall 2009 pools. The current figure is similar to our all-time low of 20 in fall 2008. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

No. 1 national problem still the economy, overshadowing everything. Fully 59 percent named the economy as the top national problem, up from 46 percent last fall. Perceptions seem to have reverted closer to the level reported a year ago, when an unprecedented 66 percent named the economy No. 1. The percentage in fall 2008 was 53 percent. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

State-mood barometer stable, much higher than national mood. Tennessee's barometer stands at 46, not significantly different from fall's 47 but up marginally from 43 last spring. The state barometer remains considerably higher than the national scale. The state barometer also has not experienced the current, pessimistic dip that the national measure has taken. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

Economy No. 1 state problem, but below national level. About 39 percent named the economy the No. 1 problem facing the state, up from 31 percent in fall. Education scored No. 2 at 10 percent, and health followed at 9 percent. Those in the middle years (35-64) are more likely to name the economy as the top state problem, at 50 percent. *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

Detailed Findings

MTSU Poll Economic Report, Spring 2010

Politics predicts worry about national economy, but age, income predict real suffering *(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)*

Republicans have a lock hold on worry about the national economy, with 43 percent very worried about national economic prospects over the next few years and another 40 percent somewhat worried. By contrast, just about one-fourth of Democrats (24 percent) are very worried, though nearly half (48 percent) are somewhat worried.

Forty percent of independents leaning Democratic and neutral independents are very worried, though only 11 percent of Republican-leaning independents are very worried.

Meanwhile, asked whether they themselves have been hurt financially by the recession, two-thirds of Tennesseans answer that they have. For all *except* those who describe their politics as far right (just 8 percent of our sample), age is the best predictor of feeling the recession's bite. More than three-quarters (77 percent) of those in the middle years (age 35-64) say they are suffering, and 60 percent of those 65 and above agree. By contrast, half of the 18-34 group are hurt.

Just how badly the recession has hurt, however, is predicted by income. Of the two-thirds who say they've been harmed by the recession, about half say they have been hurt a great deal, and the other half say only some. But breaking these responses down by income shows that 68 percent of those with family incomes of \$25,000 per year and less report they have been hurt a great deal. By contrast, fewer than half (42 percent) of those making above \$25,000 report being hurt a great deal.

Asked how worried they are about their own family's finances, Tennesseans likewise answer differently based on their income. Overall, about one in five (18 percent) are very worried, with 38 percent somewhat worried. But for those making \$25,000 or less, 34 percent are very worried, compared to 20 percent in the \$40,001 to \$50,000 group and 11 percent in the \$50,001 and above bracket.

In our survey last fall, 71 percent reported that the recession had hurt them financially, a number slightly but insignificantly more than the 67 percent who report recession pain this spring. Equivalent numbers (33 percent fall, 34 percent now) reported being very worried about the national economic future last fall and in the current poll. Those very worried about their own family's finances were slightly but insignificantly lower this spring (19 percent) than last fall (23 percent). If this trend continues, future data may suggest a significant brightening in economic prospects.

Tennesseans want the state to be generous to students, the needy

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)

Despite their conservative reputation, a plurality of Tennesseans generally favors more state spending for education and those who need extraordinary levels of help. By contrast, new highway construction and law enforcement fall nearer the bottom as priorities.

For example, more than half of Tennesseans think the state is spending too little on elementary and secondary education (65 percent). Tennesseans also, by a plurality, favor spending more on foster care (48 percent), community and technical colleges (48 percent), the handicapped (47 percent), the mentally challenged (45 percent), and mental health (45 percent). A plurality is the largest group in a population – in this case, the number who think the state spends too little compared both to those who think spending is about right or too much.

And pluralities also think state spending is too low for state universities (41 percent), the environment (40 percent), TennCare (41 percent), mass transportation (38 percent), highway maintenance (37 percent), and welfare (32 percent). Only law enforcement (39 percent v. 41 percent about right) and new highway construction rates less than a plurality (25 percent v. 46 percent about right).

Since just last spring – as budget problems have intensified – the numbers thinking the state is spending too little have shrunk slightly.

For example, in spring 1999, all categories of education topped the 50 mark for too little spending (62 percent elementary and secondary schools, 54 percent community and technical colleges, 51 percent universities), while today only elementary and secondary spending tops the 50 percent mark. Other services remained about the same as spring 1999, including programs for the mentally challenged (47 percent), the handicapped (also 47 percent), mental health (44 percent), and foster care (44 percent).

In general, political orientation is the best indicator of whether one thinks the state is spending too little on all of these items, with liberals to middle-of-the-roaders significantly favoring more spending compared to conservatives.

National-mood barometer drops since 2009 polls, political polarization extreme

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)

Even as the recession eases technically, economic prospects appear grim in Tennessee, returning citizens' perception of the national mood to 21 out of 100, down from 28 in our spring and fall 2009 polls. The current figure is similar to our all-time low of 20 in fall 2008. In fall 2006, by contrast, the score was 35.

This is consistent with economists' acknowledgment that most measures indicating a recovery have yet to have a significant positive effect on the economic lives of most people and is also perhaps related to darkening hopes for the Obama administration.

Here, a deep partisan divide is evident. By party affiliation, Democrats score the mood at 37, down from 49 in the fall. The barometer for independents has dropped to 13 from 30. Moderate Republicans score 20, while firm Republicans score 2, similar to last fall's 3.

Our national barometer, derived from one used by the Gallup Poll, is a 100-point index based on presidential approval, perceptions of the state of the economy, and satisfaction with the nation's direction.

President Obama still exhibits relatively good job performance ratings given the circumstance. A firm 42 percent still approve of President Obama's job performance, similar to 46 percent in the fall. Just 17 percent approve of the direction the nation is going, down from fall's 28 percent, and 55 percent rate the national economic condition as poor, down from 51 percent.

No. 1 national problem still the economy, overshadowing everything

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)

Fully 59 percent named the economy as the top national problem, up from 46 percent last fall. Perceptions seem to have reverted closer to the level reported a year ago, when an unprecedented 66 percent named the economy No. 1 in an open-ended question regarding the nation's top problem. The percentage in fall 2008 was 53 percent.

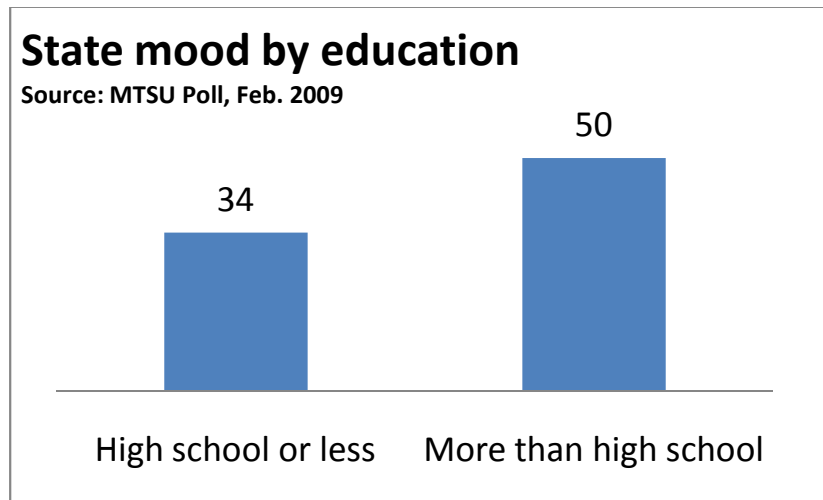
All other national issues are hardly on Tennesseans' radar screen, with 5 percent naming the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan or six percent naming the president as the top issue. Only 7 respondents (2 percent) mentioned healthcare as the top national issue, perhaps because it, too, is regarded as an economic issue.

Just over a majority (52 percent) of those with college degrees or higher named the economy as the top issue, while 62 percent with some college or less named the economy. Among those with some college or less, a hefty 71 percent under 35 named the economy No. 1. For those 35 and above, the figure dropped to 54 percent, still a substantial number.

State-mood barometer stable, much higher than national mood

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)

Tennessee's barometer stands at 46, not significantly different from fall's 47 but up marginally from 43 last spring. The state barometer remains considerably higher than the national scale, which scores 21, down from 28 in the fall. The state barometer also has not experienced the current, pessimistic dip that the national measure has taken.



Education level is once again the key predictor of one's mood regarding the state, with those with at least some college scoring 51, compared to 33 for with high school diplomas or less. Our state barometer, derived from a scale used by the Gallup Poll, is a 100-point index based on gubernatorial approval, perceptions of the state of the economy, and satisfaction with the state's direction.

A surprising 43 percent are satisfied with the way things are now going in Tennessee despite darkening budget prospects – still lower to fall's 49 percent. Fully 52 percent still approve of Gov. Phil Bredesen's performance, compared to 42 percent for President Obama. Still, only about 14 percent rate Tennessee's economy good, while a majority (57 percent) scores it only fair. And 28 percent say it is poor.

Economy No. 1 state problem, but below national level

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 615.477.8389)

About 39 percent named the economy the No. 1 problem facing the state, up from 31 percent in fall. In this survey, 59 percent named the economy the No. 1 national problem. This finding suggests that economic problems are conceived of more as a national than a local responsibility.

Education scored No. 2 at 10 percent, and health followed at 9 percent. Presumably, the national dimensions of economic failure and the aura surrounding TennCare still causes Tennesseans to see the economy as a national problem and health in more local terms, even given the prominence of reform on President Obama's agenda.

Those in the middle years (35-64) are more likely to name the economy as the top state problem, at 50 percent. Those 65 and over mention the economy only about one-third of the time (34 percent), while only a quarter (25 percent) of those 34 and under concur.

Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 15-27, 2010 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 634 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 percent 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 estimates 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 Percent	Unadjusted Sample Percent	Adjusted Sample Percent
Age:			
18-34	29.5	12.5	29.5
35-49	28.3	23.3	28.3
50-64	24.9	35.3	25.0
65+	17.3	28.8	17.2
Race:			
White	82.1	87.2	81.7
Black	15.5	9.0	15.7
Other	2.4	3.8	2.6
Gender:			
Male	48.0	48.3	47.6
Female	52.0	51.7	52.4

Small variations in reported percentages (1 percent or less) sometimes result from rounding variations in different statistical procedures or the way different programs handle population weights. Weights also can increase the reported sample size in frequency tables. And, in our summary, where reported percentages do not otherwise total 100 percent, small numbers of those who are undecided or refused to answer may have been omitted.