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Summary of Findings, Fall 2008

Debate to happen in Obama's city but McCain's state. Next week's presidential debate in Nashville will bring senators Barack Obama and John McCain to the relatively Democratic capital of a firmly Republican state. McCain leads Obama by a firm 48 percent to 36 percent statewide with 10 percent undecided. But Metro Nashville is relatively warmer toward Obama. (Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)

Economy trumps other national issues by unprecedented margin. An unprecedented 53 percent of Tennesseans name the economy and job issues as the No. 1 national problem in an open-ended question where the top issues typically are mentioned by about 20 percent of respondents. (Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

Barometer of national mood at all-time low, with dramatic party split. Our 100-point barometer of the national mood stands at an all-time low of 20. The rating stands at 41 among Republicans, 16 among independents, and an astoundingly low 4 among Democrats. (Contact Bob Wyatt, 615-477-8389)

Doubt prevails about Palin's "bridge to nowhere" assertion. Most Tennesseans express doubts about vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's assertion that, as governor of Alaska, she turned down federal funding for the state's infamous "bridge to nowhere." (Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

No consensus on the meaning of Obama's "lipstick on a pig" remark. Tennesseans divide evenly – and along party lines – on whether Sen. Barack Obama's "lipstick on a pig" comment was a personal attack on Gov. Sarah Palin. (Contact Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)

Alexander outpolls Tuke among likely voters. Republican incumbent Sen. Lamar Alexander outpolls Democratic challenger Bob Tuke 50 percent to 26 percent among likely voters in Tennessee's race for U.S. Senate, but about a fourth (23 percent) say they aren't yet sure whom they favor. (Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Other topics: Bush compares poorly to other U.S. presidents • Tennesseans rank economy, energy, education among issues most personally important • Most evangelicals think churches should express political views • Many want more religious expression by politicians • Many discount notion that religious conservatives influence Republicans too much.

Details of Findings

MTSU Poll Political Report, Spring 2008

Debate to happen in Obama's city but McCain's state *(Contact Jason Reineke, 615-494-7746)*

Next week's presidential debate in Nashville will bring senators Barack Obama and John McCain to the relatively Democratic capital of a firmly Republican state.

Among all Tennessee adults, the Republican presidential ticket of McCain and Gov. Sarah Palin outpolls the Democratic ticket of Obama and Sen. Joe Biden 48 percent to 36 percent, a double-digit lead with only 10 percent undecided and the rest declining to answer or planning to vote for someone else.

But while McCain leads Obama 52 percent to 33 percent in the rest of the state, the percentages flip-flop inside Metro Nashville's borders to 59 percent for Obama and Biden compared to 28 percent for McCain and Palin. The sample within Metro Nashville is too small to rule out a statistical tie, even with such a wide gap in the percentages. But the data do indicate that while Tennessee as a whole belongs to McCain, Metro Nashville is relatively friendly territory for Obama.

Most Tennesseans appear to have made up their minds at this point with regard to who they think should be the next president. Among McCain's supporters, 93 percent say they are certain they will vote for him, leaving only 7 percent who say that they may still change their minds. Similarly, 90 percent of Obama's supporters say they are certain they will vote for him, with only 10 percent stating that they might change their minds. Among those who remain undecided, 24 percent say, when pressed, that they are leaning toward McCain, while 18 percent say they are leaning toward Obama. The rest reiterate that they are undecided.

The Republican lead grows larger among likely voters in Tennessee, 55 percent of whom would vote for McCain and Palin and 35 percent of whom would vote for Obama and Biden. Just 7 percent of likely voters are undecided. The poll defines likely voters as those who say they voted in the state's 2006 U.S. Senate race, are presently registered to vote, and plan to vote in November's presidential election. There are 357 such likely voters in the poll's sample.

The McCain campaign seems to have had modest success at attracting supporters of former Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, whom 22 percent of Tennesseans say they voted for in the Democratic primary. A quarter of those who voted for the junior senator from New York in Tennessee's Democratic presidential primary say that they would now vote for McCain and Palin in the general election. However, 56 percent of those who report that they voted for Clinton in the primary say that they would now vote for Obama and Biden. The rest of Clinton's supporters remain undecided at this point or say they would vote for someone other than McCain or Obama.

Race is the most important demographic difference in presidential candidate preference. Of African Americans in Tennessee, 87 percent would vote for Obama and Biden, while only 7 percent would vote for McCain and Palin. In contrast, among those who said that they were white or a member of some other racial group, only 28 percent say they would vote for Obama and Biden, while 56 percent say they would vote for McCain and Palin. However, a majority of whites who make less than \$15,000 per year would vote for Obama, while a majority of whites who make more than \$15,000 per year would vote for McCain and Palin. Support for the Republican ticket was especially strong among white males making more than \$50,000 per year, 68 percent of whom said they would vote for McCain and Palin.

In addition to their own personal preference, poll participants were also asked who they thought was currently leading the presidential race in the state and the nation. A narrow majority of Tennesseans (51 percent) estimate, consistent with the poll's results, that McCain currently has the lead in the state. However, only 27 percent of Tennesseans estimate, consistent with recent national polling, that McCain and Obama are tied in the nation as a whole, with 30 percent saying they think Obama leads nationally, and 24 percent saying they think McCain leads nationally. The remaining 19 percent say they don't know who leads nationally or refuse to make an estimate.

Economy trumps other national issues by unprecedented margin

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-4778389)

Fully 53 percent of Tennesseans name the economy and job issues as the No. 1 national problem in an open-ended question. Typically, the top issue attracts only about a 20 percent consensus, so a 53 percent consensus is truly extraordinary. The energy crisis – though related to the economy – is mentioned by just 8 percent, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by just 5 percent. This spread between the top problem and other issues is also unprecedented.

In fall 2006, by contrast, 22 percent rated the wars as the top issue, followed by terrorism. Today, age is the best predictor of perceptions of the No. 1 national problem, with those under 35 mentioning the economy 60 percent of the time compared to 51 percent for older Tennesseans.

Economic woes also top the list of perceived problems Tennesseans face at the state level, although the consensus is less dramatic than at the national level. A little over one-third (34 percent) name the economy as the top state problem, followed by education at 12 percent and health issues at 10 percent. The ranking represents a marked shift from last spring's poll, when 20 percent mentioned education as No. 1, followed by health issues (18 percent) and the economy (16 percent).

Those without a college degree are feeling the financial pinch more, with 36 percent mentioning the economy as the top state problem compared to 30 percent for those with undergraduate or graduate college degrees.

Barometer of national mood at all-time low, with dramatic party split

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-4778389)

Tennesseans' perceptions of the status of the nation are – as usual – more gloomy than their perceptions of the state. Our 100-point barometer of the national mood stands at an all-time low of 20, dramatically down from 35 in fall 2006, when we last employed the measure. By contrast, the state barometer stands at a somewhat more optimistic 54, down from 61 in fall 2006. Last spring, the state barometer was at 57.

The state and national barometers are based on an index computed from the rating of the governor or president, the perception of the state or national economy, and the direction the state or nation seems to be going in.

Party affiliation is the best single predictor of the national score, with Republicans rating the national mood at 41, while for independents and others it stands at 16. But Democrats rate the mood at an astoundingly low 4.

Republicans and independents have a rosier perception of the state's mood, with a score of 54. For Democrats, that figure is 44 – a score still above Republicans' rating of the national mood.

Interestingly, Republican males rate the state mood at a robust 68, compared to Republican women at 56.

A look at the components of the state and national barometers reveals that:

Ratings of the national economy in the pits but partisan. Fully 58 percent of Tennesseans rate the national economy as poor, and another 29 percent rate it only fair, while 12 percent say it good.

While 75 percent of Democrats and 57 percent of independents select poor, just 40 percent of Republicans agree – suggesting, as in previous MTSU Polls, that these groups are living in different perceptual worlds.

Just under two-thirds (63 percent) of women rate the economy poor, compared to just over half (51 percent) of men. By income category, the wealthier are less likely to rate the national economy poor: 46 percent of those with incomes greater than \$50,000 v. 69 percent between \$40,001 and \$50,000, 76 percent between \$25,001 and \$40,000, 63 percent between \$15,001 and \$25,000, and 65 percent at less than \$15,000.

Of course, Republicans are wealthier than independents and Democrats, with a full majority (56 percent) of Republicans reporting a household income over \$50,000 – compared to 36 percent of Democrats and 43 percent of independents.

Tennesseans say state economy is better than the nation's. Only about one-fourth (24 percent) of Tennesseans rate the state economy as poor, while a near-majority (48 percent) chose only fair. Those with some college or trade school (43 percent) are less likely to select only fair compared to 50 percent with a high school education or less and 51 percent of college graduates and above.

Bush approval has hit an all-time low. Less than a third (32 percent) of Tennesseans approve of the job George Bush is doing as president, while fully 59 percent disapprove. This is down marginally from spring 2007, when 34 percent approved. The big drop came after spring 2006, when Bush stood at 42 percent approval.

The vast cleavage in party affiliation is again pronounced, with 5 percent of Democrats approving, compared to 23 percent of independents and more than two-thirds (67 percent) of Republicans approving. The differences are so dramatic that it is possible to posit that Democrats and Republicans do not live in the same universe, with independent perspectives more closely aligned with Democratic views.

Gender again has an effect among Republicans, with 70 percent of men approving compared with 62 percent of women.

But Bredesen approval remarkably high again and nonpartisan. Gov. Phil Bredesen's approval level stands at 58 percent, about where it stood in 2003 but down from 67% in spring 2007 and 72% in spring 2004. He enjoys the approval of 69 percent of likely voters – those who report being registered, voting in the last presidential election, and planning to vote this fall – compared to 44% of those unlikely to vote. And fully 63 percent of those with incomes above \$40,000 approve of Bredesen, while the figure among those with lower incomes is 49 percent. Significantly, in a highly polarized era and state, Bredesen transcends party, with popularity on all sides. But his ratings do not transcend economic standing, where people with lower incomes are suffering.

Huge majority, including Republicans, dissatisfied with nation's direction. Only 14 percent of Tennesseans are satisfied with the direction the country is going, but again party affiliation leads to huge differences in perceptions. Still, 72 percent of Republicans are dissatisfied (despite their majority approval of President Bush). But 83 percent of Democrats and independents are dissatisfied. Among Democrats, age has significance, with 72 percent under 35 dissatisfied compared to 88 percent of those 35 and above.

Tennesseans more upbeat at the state level as usual. Fully 47 percent of Tennesseans are satisfied with the direction the state is going, but only 34 percent of Democrats are satisfied compared with 59 percent of Republicans and independents. This finding makes Bredesen's approval rating even more remarkable.

Doubt prevails about Palin's "bridge to nowhere" assertion

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Most Tennesseans express doubts about vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin's assertion that, as governor of Alaska, she turned down federal funding for the state's infamous "bridge to nowhere."

About a third of Tennesseans (39 percent) say they don't know whether Palin's assertion is true. Another 14 percent call the assertion "mostly false," and 10 percent characterize it as "entirely false." Only about a third of Tennesseans say the assertion is either "mostly true" (28 percent) or "entirely true" (10 percent).

Not unexpectedly, party affiliation is the key predictor of attitudes toward the assertion's veracity. Among partisans, whether Democrat or Republican, about a third still say they don't know one way or another. But nearly two-thirds of Republicans describe Palin's bridge story as either entirely true (17 percent) or mostly true (44 percent), while just 3 percent describe it as mostly false, and another 3 percent describe it as entirely false. By contrast, over a third of Democrats describe the assertion as either entirely false (19 percent) or mostly false (23 percent), while 15 percent say it is mostly true, and 6 percent say it is entirely true.

Independents are about as likely as partisans to say they don't know (39 percent). But landing between the positions of more partisan Tennesseans, 11 percent of the state's independents see the assertion as entirely true, 27 percent see it as mostly true, 17 percent see it as mostly false, and 7 percent see it as entirely false.

With party affiliation ignored, Palin's account fares a little better among the state's likely voters than among those less likely to vote. Just under half of likely voters consider Palin's assertion mostly true (33 percent) or entirely true (12 percent). Among those less likely to vote, by contrast, only about a quarter consider Palin's assertion either mostly true (18 percent) or entirely true (8 percent). Just under a third (30 percent) of likely voters say they don't know whether Palin's version is true or false compared to about half (51 percent) of those less likely to vote. "Likely voters" are respondents who say they are registered to vote, report voting in the 2006 U.S. Senate race, and say they plan to vote in the upcoming election.

Political partisanship and likelihood of voting matter more than gender when it comes to perspectives on the truth of Palin's story. But setting these distinctions aside, Palin, the first woman to be named as a Republican vice presidential candidate, seems to enjoy more credibility among men than among women on her account of the "bridge to nowhere" story. Forty-two percent of men consider Palin's version either entirely true (10 percent) or mostly true (32 percent). Among women, by contrast, 33 percent consider Palin's version either entirely (10 percent) or mostly (23 percent) true. Most of the difference stems from more women (45 percent) than men (31 percent) saying they don't know whether Palin's version is true or false.

Speaking during the Republican convention, Palin said, "I told the Congress, 'Thanks, but no thanks, on that bridge to nowhere,'" referring to plans to spend \$223 million in federal funds building a bridge to Gravina Island in Alaska. Palin repeated the claim on the campaign trail despite reports from news outlets and FactCheck.org documenting that she initially supported the project and canceled it only after Congressional support for the bridge had dried up.

About a quarter (25 percent) of Tennesseans say they've paid "a lot" of attention to news about Palin's assertion. About the same proportion say they've paid "some" (28 percent), "not much" (21 percent), or "none at all" (23 percent). About a third of likely voters (34 percent) have paid a lot of attention compared to under a quarter (15

percent) of Tennesseans less likely to vote. Attention to news about the comment – and attention to print and broadcast news in general – tends mainly to reduce the number of “don’t know” responses rather than shift attitudes about the statement’s truthfulness.

No consensus on the meaning of Obama’s “lipstick on a pig” remark

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

About a fourth (26 percent) of Tennesseans think Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama’s “lipstick on a pig” comment was a personal attack on Republican vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin. Another fourth (26 percent) think he was criticizing the Republican presidential ticket’s promise to change Washington. The rest divide into a fourth who think he meant something else (23 percent), and a fourth who don’t know what he meant by the remark (25 percent).

Among likely voters – those who report being registered to vote, voting in the state’s 2006 U.S. Senate race, and planning to vote again this November – the proportion who say they don’t know what Obama meant drops to 16 percent, and the perception that he was criticizing the Republican ticket’s “change” promise barely edges out the personal attack interpretation 32 percent to 29 percent. A quarter (23 percent) say he meant something else. These likely voters further divide by party identification, with a 42 percent plurality of Republicans interpreting the comment as a personal attack on Palin and a 36 percent plurality of Democrats and Independents interpreting it as a criticism of the Republican ticket’s promise to change Washington.

As with attitudes toward Palin’s “bridge to nowhere” assertion, attention to news about the comment in particular and to print and broadcast news in general all tend chiefly to reduce the proportion who say they don’t know. Attention to news does not tend to increase one interpretation more than another.

During a Sept. 9 speech in Virginia, Obama pointed out what he considered a number of policy and campaign similarities between Republican presidential nominee John McCain and President George W. Bush, then added, “That’s not change. That’s just calling some, the same thing something different. You know, you can put lipstick on a pig, but it’s still a pig.” An ad by McCain Palin 2008 asserted that Obama’s “lipstick” comment was a sexist jab at Palin, who had quipped during her Republican National Convention speech that the only difference between a hockey mom and a pit bull was lipstick.

Alexander outpolls Tuke among likely voters, but a third undecided

(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

Republican incumbent Sen. Lamar Alexander outpolls Democratic challenger Bob Tuke 50 percent to 26 percent among likely voters in Tennessee’s race for U.S. Senate, but about a fourth (23 percent) say they aren’t yet sure whom they favor.

Among these likely voters, Republicans overwhelmingly support Alexander (81 percent) with most of the rest (16 percent) undecided. These undecided Republicans tend to live in Middle and West Tennessee. Similarly, most Democrats support Tuke (60 percent), but 17 percent favor Alexander, and 21 percent are undecided. Alexander has the lead among independents, 47 percent of whom say they favor him. But 36 percent of independent likely voters are undecided, and 15 percent favor Tuke.

The preferences of Tennesseans who are less likely to vote also divide sharply along party lines, but – as one might expect – with proportionally more people undecided, especially among independents.

Overall, Tennesseans take dim view of Bush at end of his presidency
(Contact Jason Reineke 615-494-7746)

Over half of Tennesseans rate George W. Bush as poor or worse compared to other U.S. presidents. Eighteen percent consider him a “poor” president relative to other chief executives, 15 percent rate him as “very poor,” and about a quarter (24 percent) call him the worst U.S. president ever. Under half consider him either “good” (32 percent) “very good” (11 percent) or “The best U.S. president ever” (under 1 percent).

Naturally, these ratings correlate strongly with party identity. A majority of Republicans (56 percent) rate him as “good.” “Good” is also the most popular rating among independents (31 percent), but a strong plurality of Democrats (46 percent) consider him the worst U.S. president in history.

There are similarly sharp political divisions on one of the issues most central to the Bush presidency – the war in Iraq. Overall, slightly more Tennesseans believe it was a mistake to send troops to Iraq (48 percent) than believe it was not a mistake (44 percent). Majorities of Democrats and independents in the state say it was a mistake, but a majority of Tennessee Republicans say it was not. However, Tennesseans appear to feel more favorably about the current status of the war, with 56 percent saying that things are going either moderately or very well for the U.S. in Iraq now.

Besides economy, energy, environment, taxes, education top personal concerns
(Contact Ken Blake, 615-210-6187)

The economy is by far the issue Tennesseans say most affects them personally right now. Fully 82 percent say the economy affects them “a great deal” personally.

But other issues rank high on the personal agendas of Tennesseans, including energy and the environment, taxes, and education. By contrast, the hot-button social issues of abortion and gay marriage rank at the bottom of what most affects Tennesseans personally.

The findings indicate that the personal importance of abortion and gay marriage has changed little since a year ago, when both issues also ranked low in personal importance among state residents. Other issues have moved around a bit, though. The proportion describing energy and the environment as “very important” rose 17 percentage points, possibly propelled by rising fuel costs and hurricane-induced gasoline shortages in Middle Tennessee during the poll’s field time. Health care and Iraq saw modest declines of 6 percentage points each. Race relations, already low in personal importance for Tennesseans, declined an additional seven percentage points.

Issue	Pct. Very Important	
	Fall 07	Fall 08
Economy	74%	82%
Energy/Environment	55%	72%
Education	69%	69%
Taxes	70%	68%
Healthcare	72%	66%
Iraq	62%	56%
Terrorism	54%	53%
Crime	56%	52%
Immigration	47%	44%
Foreign relations	42%	40%
Political divisions	37%	37%
Abortion	34%	35%
Gay marriage	28%	26%
Race relations	33%	26%

Some groups consider some issues more important than other groups do, of course. For example, 78 percent of Republicans consider taxes very important compared to 63 percent of Democrats and Independents, while over three-fourths (77 percent) of Democrats consider education very important compared to about two-thirds (63 percent) of Republicans and independents. Three-fourths of women (75 percent) consider healthcare very important compared to just over half (58 percent) of men. Nearly two-thirds of Tennesseans who do not have a college degree say that the war in Iraq is very important to them personally compared to under half (49 percent) of college graduates. And a majority (54 percent) of strongly evangelical Christians who attend church regularly consider abortion personally important compared to under a third (31 percent) of regular churchgoers who identify less strongly with evangelical Christianity.

Majority of Evangelicals think churches should express political views
(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-4778389)

While a majority of Tennesseans (50 percent) think that churches should keep out of politics, a similar majority of evangelicals think churches should express their views.

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 believing in three of these propositions or more are defined as evangelicals in our poll.

Among those scoring 0 on the evangelicalism scale, 63 percent believe churches should stay out of politics, while 51 percent of those scoring 1 or 2 felt likewise.

Among evangelicals, strong Republicans (62 percent) were far more likely than others (47 percent) to favor speaking out. For the record, about one-third of evangelicals are strong Republicans.

Tennessee's overall figures here are similar to national beliefs, where 52% think churches should keep out of politics, according to results from a Pew Research Center at <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/883/american-evangelicalism>.

About two-thirds (66 percent) of Tennesseans, however, believe that churches should not endorse candidates. Here, 55 percent on the far right think they should not, while 68 percent of all others oppose church endorsements.

Plurality believe too little religious expression by politicians

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-4778389)

Fully 41 percent of Tennesseans think politicians say too little about religion, while 26 percent say the amount is about right, and 23 percent say there is too much religious talk.

For the far right, the figure for too little is 53 percent, dropping to 46 percent for conservatives, 35 percent for middle of the roaders and liberals, and 30 percent for the far left.

A majority (79 percent) believe that it is important to have strong religious beliefs (44 percent totally agree, and 35 mostly agree). Here, church attendance is key, with 57 percent who go once a week or more agreeing completely, compared to 38 percent of those who go about once a month, 27 percent who go seldom, and 16 percent of non-attenders.

Plurality don't believe religious conservatives influence Republicans too much

(Contact Bob Wyatt, 616-4778389)

Fully 46 percent of Tennesseans disagree that religious conservatives have too much influence on Republicans, but 37 percent agree. This compares to a 41 percent disagreement v. 48 percent agreement in Pew's national data.

Again, partisanship has a big effect, with only 15 percent of liberals and the far left disagreeing that religious conservatives have too much influence, while 66 percent of conservatives disagree.

When the tables are reversed, 44 percent of Tennesseans agree that non-religious liberals have too much influence on the Democrats, while Pew's national figure is an equivalent 43 percent. Here, again, partisan breakdowns are similar to those in the conservatives-Republicans issue.

All of these data indicate that religion, political party, and political orientation are intertwined in a way that, say, Canadians or Europeans would find odd and contradictory but that are not too far removed from national norms.

Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Sept. 15-27 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 635 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 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	Sample	Weight	Result
Age:				
18-34	29.8%	17.9%	1.67	31.5%
35-49	28.7%	25.3%	1.13	29.1%
50-64	24.5%	31.6%	0.78	24.2%
65+	16.9%	25.3%	0.67	15.3%
Race:				
White	82.1%	82.1%	1.00	80.4%
Black	15.5%	12.8%	1.00	14.2%
Other	2.4%	5.0%	1.00	5.5%
Gender:				
Male	48.1%	44.7%	1.08	48.1%
Female	51.9%	55.3%	0.94	51.9%

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.