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## MTSU Poll Report, Spring 2011

**Tenure viewed as making firing bad teachers hard, but no consensus on ending collective bargaining.**

Tennesseans generally think tenure makes getting rid of bad teachers hard. But there is no consensus on whether to end collective bargaining for teacher unions in the state. (*Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187*)

**More Tennesseans would vote for any Republican nominee in 2012 than would vote for candidate Obama.**

Only 31 percent say they would vote for Obama, while 48 percent say they would vote for "his Republican opponent." The rest are undecided or would vote for neither one. (*Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746*)

**Tennesseans say illegal immigration a serious problem, Arizona-style immigration law "About right."**

Seventy-five percent call immigration a serious or very serious problem. A plurality supports requiring police to determine citizenship of anyone they suspect might be in the country illegally, and a majority supports requiring people to prove citizenship if questioned by police. (*Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746*)

**Top options for closing the state budget gap draw limited support at best.** Tennesseans recognize that covering the state's projected budget gap will require tough measures. But they show little enthusiasm for most of state lawmakers' available options. (*Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187*)

**State residents split on increasing regulation of gun sales, banning high-capacity ammo clips.** Tennesseans divide essentially evenly over whether gun sales should be kept as they are or made more strict. Another statistical tie occurs over whether to ban high-capacity ammunition clips. (*Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746*)

**Support remains high for letting food stores sell wine.** Sixty-nine percent of Tennesseans say a store that sells food should also be allowed to sell wine, provided the store is located in a place that allows the sale of alcoholic beverages. (*Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187*)

**A plurality of Tennesseans favor repealing health law.** Fifty percent of Tennesseans think Congress should try to repeal the health care law that was passed last year, while 34 percent think Congress should let the law stand, and 15 percent say they don't know. The rest decline to answer. (*Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187*)

**Tennesseans generally support Muslims' religious rights, and attitudes toward mosques hold steady despite controversy.** Much like in the fall poll, most Tennesseans either support or neither support nor oppose Muslims' religious rights, including the construction of mosques. The exception is the Park 51 mosque and community center in New York, which most oppose. (*Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746*)

**President Obama's job approval holding steady in Tennessee, but majority still disapproves.** Thirty-nine percent approve of the job he's doing as president, while 52 percent disapprove. FOX News viewing leads independents to disapprove. (*Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746*)

**Other findings:**

- President Obama and Congressional Republicans still not doing enough to cooperate, Tennesseans say.
- More Tennesseans approve of new governor, Legislature than disapprove.
- Tennesseans say environment good, sufficiently protected, and secondary to economic growth.
- Economy remains top concern at state and national levels.
- Tea Party approval edges downward, membership remains low.

## **Detailed Findings**

### **Tenure viewed as making firing bad teachers hard, but no consensus on ending collective bargaining**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

The prevailing view of teacher tenure among Tennesseans is that tenure makes getting rid of bad teachers hard.

However, no single view prevails when Tennesseans are asked whether the state should eliminate the ability of teacher unions in Tennessee to engage in collective bargaining with local boards of education about teacher salaries, benefits and other employment issues.

Presented with each of two randomly ordered statements about teacher tenure, 54 percent of Tennesseans choose the statement, “Tenure makes it hard to get rid of bad teachers” as most representative of their viewpoint, while 29 percent choose the alternative statement, “Tenure protects good teachers from being fired without just cause” as most indicative of what they think. Sixteen percent say they don’t know, and the rest decline to answer.

The order in which the two statements are presented to respondents makes a significant difference, with the “Tenure makes it hard to get rid of bad teachers” statement drawing a 49 percent plurality when offered first and a 61 percent majority when offered last. In polling, the last in a series of options offered to respondents sometimes is more popular simply because it’s the easiest one for respondents to recall. But even when mentioned first, the view that tenure makes getting rid of bad teachers hard still outpolls the view that tenure protects good teachers.

Tennesseans show no clear consensus, though, on whether to end collective bargaining for teacher unions, a question presently stirring heated debate in other states, most notably Wisconsin, and poised to be taken up by Tennessee’s General Assembly.

Thirty-seven percent of state residents say they favor “eliminating the ability of teacher unions in Tennessee to negotiate with local boards of education about teacher salaries, benefits and other employment issues.” But a statistically even 41 percent say they would oppose such a measure, and a sizable 22 percent don’t know.

The view that tenure makes getting rid of bad teachers difficult is most common among political conservatives earning over \$50,000 a year in household income. The view that tenure protects good teachers, meanwhile, is most common among Middle Tennessee Democrats earning between \$25,000 and \$40,000 a year in household income.

It is less clear which, if any, population subgroups are most and least likely to support eliminating collective bargaining for teacher unions. Specifically, the large proportion of undecided respondents makes detecting such patterns difficult based on the answers given by the remaining respondents who do express an opinion. The strongest patterns say more about who does and does not express an opinion than about what that opinion might be. For example, among Tennesseans with little involvement in politics, 33 percent say they don’t know, while about half as many (15 percent) of more politically involved Tennesseans say they don’t know. And among these more politically involved Tennesseans, 26 percent of those with a high school education or less say they don’t know compared to just 10 percent of those with at least some college or trade school education.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the frequent, politically charged national media coverage of debates over collective bargaining for teacher unions in other states, what opinions Tennesseans do offer on the question do not vary significantly by party affiliation. Thirty-six percent of Republican respondents favored ending collective bargaining for teacher unions, compared to 34 percent of Democratic respondents and 38 percent of independent respondents. But these differences are not large enough to suggest a similar pattern in the general Tennessee population that the poll’s random sample represents. For now, Tennesseans mainly seem either unfamiliar with the issue or confused by the question, or maybe both.

### **More Tennesseans would vote for any Republican nominee in 2012 than would vote for candidate Obama**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

When asked who they would vote for if the 2012 election were being held today and the candidates were Democrat Barack Obama “and his Republican opponent,” a plurality of Tennesseans, 48 percent, say that they would vote for

the Republican. Thirty-one percent say that they would vote for Obama, 14 percent say that they don't know who they would vote for at this time, and 6 percent volunteered that they would vote for neither candidate.

Seventy-seven percent of Democrats would vote for Obama, and 85 percent of Republicans would vote for his Republican opponent. Among independents, 46 percent would vote for the Republican, 23 percent don't know whom they would vote for, and 20 percent say they would vote for Obama.

**Tennesseans say illegal immigration a serious problem, Arizona-style immigration law “about right”**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Seventy-five percent of Tennesseans say that illegal immigration is a somewhat or very serious problem. Only 22 percent say it is a not too, or not at all, serious problem.

What should be done? When asked about the aspect of Arizona's recently-passed law designed to deal with illegal immigration that "...requires police making a stop, detention, or arrest to attempt to determine the person's immigration status if police suspect the person is not lawfully present in the country," a plurality of 42 percent say the provision is "about right," while nearly equal percentages say that this aspect of the law goes too far or doesn't go far enough (28 percent and 25 percent, respectively).

When it comes to the aspect of the Arizona law that "...requires people to produce documents proving their immigration status if asked by police," 55 percent say that it is "about right," while 23 percent say it "doesn't go far enough," and 17 percent say it "goes too far."

**Top options for closing the state budget gap draw limited support at best**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Tennesseans recognize that covering the state's projected budget gap will require tough measures, but they show little enthusiasm for most of state lawmakers' available options.

A 52 percent majority think dealing with the budget gap will require either cutting important services (16 percent), raising state taxes (6 percent) or both (30 percent). Twenty-two percent say neither of these measures will be needed, and the remaining approximately 26 percent don't know.

Despite these attitudes, though, Tennesseans show little support for cuts to any of five of the state's largest general fund budget categories. Only 25 percent of state residents favor cuts to TennCare, 14 percent favor cuts to K-12 education, 24 percent favor cuts to higher education, and 17 percent favor cuts to children's services. Cuts to a fifth major budget category, prisons and correctional facilities, drew the most support (44 percent), but the figure is still well below a majority.

Republicans express more support than independents and Democrats for cuts to each of these categories with the exception of cuts to prisons and correctional facilities, where no significant differences exist across party lines. But even among the state's Republicans, support for cuts to these areas never rises to a majority.

Support for raising state taxes is also quite low, with just 28 percent in favor – 42 percent among Democrats, and 23 percent among Republicans, independents and others. Tennesseans overwhelmingly do not expect a tax cut this year, though. Seventy-nine percent consider it "unrealistic" to expect a tax cut this year, while 15 percent consider such an expectation "realistic," and the rest aren't sure or decline to answer. The percentages are statistically uniform across party lines.

Constitutionally banning a state income tax garners mixed support when contrasted with simultaneously introducing an income tax and reducing sales taxes. Specifically, 38 percent of state residents agree that "Tennessee should amend its constitution to forbid the state from ever introducing a tax on personal income." But 40 percent agree instead that "Tennessee should introduce a tax on personal income to lower sales taxes and eliminate taxes on groceries." The remaining fifth of Tennesseans say they don't know.

The 38 and 40 percent figures represent a statistical tie, given the poll's error margin. But the order in which the options are presented makes a significant difference, with the option presented last tending to draw the most support. When the option of constitutionally banning an income tax is mentioned last, it draws 43 percent support compared to 36 percent support for introducing an income tax and sales tax cuts. But when the option of introducing an income tax and sales tax cuts is mentioned last, the pattern reverses, with 45 percent in favor and 33 percent supporting a constitutional ban.

**State residents split on increasing regulation of gun sales, banning high-capacity ammo clips**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

A plurality of 43 percent of Tennesseans say that regulations regarding gun sales should be kept at their current levels. However, in a statistical tie, 41 percent say that gun sale laws should be made more strict. Only 12 percent say that the laws regarding the sale of firearms should be less strict. There is a marked gender gap in responses, with a majority of women, 56 percent, saying the laws should be more strict, and a majority of men, 55 percent, saying the laws should be kept as they are now.

In another statistical tie, 45 percent of Tennesseans say they would support a nationwide law banning the sale of high-capacity ammunition clips, defined in the poll question as those that hold more than 10 bullets. Forty-two percent say they would oppose such a law. Again, there is a pronounced gender difference, with 61 percent of women saying they would support a ban on high-capacity clips, and 57 percent of men saying they would oppose such a ban.

**Support remains high for letting food stores sell wine**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Sixty-nine percent of Tennesseans say a store that sells food should also be allowed to sell wine, provided the store is located in a place that allows the sale of alcoholic beverages. Seventeen percent say they oppose letting food stores sell wine, and another 13 percent are undecided. The rest decline to answer.

In the Spring 2009 MTSU Poll, by contrast, 62 percent of Tennesseans supported letting grocery stores sell wine, 26 percent were opposed, and 12 percent didn't know. Thus, support for selling wine in food stores may have edged upward since 2009, although the change is within the overlap of the two polls' error margins.

The current poll found no statistically significant difference between the results of a question asking about wine sales only in "grocery stores" (70 percent support) and a random alternative asking about wine sales in "grocery, convenience and other stores that sell food" (69 percent support).

Support was highest among politically conservative males, political moderates and liberals in Davidson and its contiguous counties who attend worship services at least occasionally, and political moderates and liberals who seldom or never attend church.

**A plurality of Tennesseans favor repealing health law; opinions heavily partisan**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Fifty percent of Tennesseans think Congress should try to repeal the health care law that was passed last year, while 34 percent think Congress should let the law stand, and 15 percent say they don't know. The rest decline to answer.

The findings in Tennessee are nearly the reverse of those in a nationwide January CBS News / New York Times poll using the same question. In that poll, 48 percent favored letting the law stand, 40 percent favored repeal, and 12 percent were unsure.

As with the national poll, though, results in Tennessee split sharply along political party lines, with 78 percent of Republicans favoring repeal, compared to 50 percent of independents and 18 percent of Democrats.

**Tennesseans generally support Muslims’ religious rights; attitudes toward mosques hold steady despite controversy**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Most Tennesseans, 74 percent, either agree or strongly agree that Muslims in the U.S. should have the same religious rights as other Americans. Fifteen percent disagree or disagree strongly, and 5 percent neither agree nor disagree.

Fifty percent of Tennesseans either disagree or strongly disagree with the proposition that local communities should be able to prohibit building mosques. Thirty-three percent agree or strongly agree that communities should be allowed to prohibit mosque construction, and 7 percent neither agree nor disagree.

When asked about a hypothetical mosque to be constructed “near where you live,” a plurality of 39 percent said that they would neither support nor oppose such a project. Twenty-five percent said that they would support or strongly support construction, and 29 percent said that they would oppose or strongly oppose construction. The difference between the percentages that would support and those who would oppose construction was within the poll’s margin of error. These numbers are nearly identical to those derived from responses to last fall’s MTSU poll.

As for the planned new mosque in Murfreesboro, Tenn., a plurality of 40 percent of Tennesseans said that they neither supported nor opposed construction. Twenty-nine percent said that they were opposed or strongly opposed to the mosque, and 25 percent said that they supported or strongly supported construction. These figures are also statistically indistinguishable from those obtained in response to last fall’s MTSU poll, which asked the same question, indicating little or no change in public opinion on the matter since then, despite public demonstrations and court proceedings on the matter.

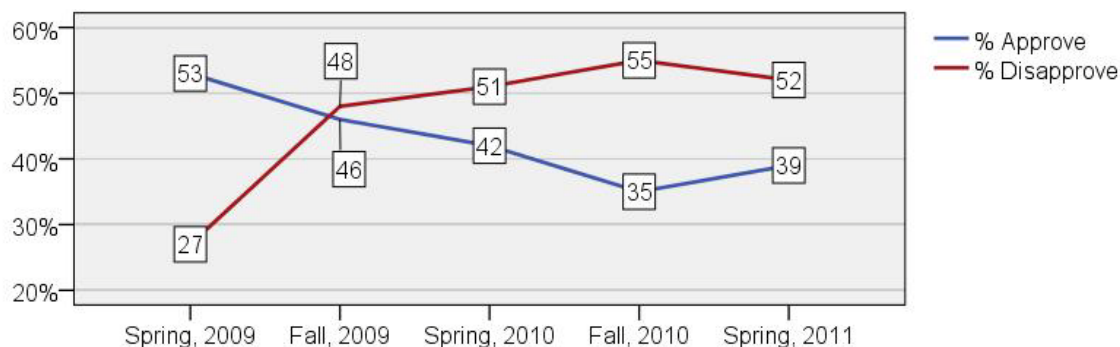
However, 55 percent of Tennesseans are opposed or strongly opposed to the Park 51 Islamic community center near Ground Zero in New York City. Only 15 percent support or strongly support the presence of Park 51. Twenty-six percent say they neither support nor oppose the facility. In the case of Park 51, slightly fewer Tennesseans now oppose the center than did in the fall, and slightly more now say that they neither support nor oppose it. These differences are narrowly outside the two polls’ margins of error.

**President Obama’s job approval holding steady in Tennessee, but majority still disapproves**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Stopping a downhill slide, President Obama’s job approval has held steady, even appearing to improve slightly, in Tennessee. Still, only 39 percent approve while 52 percent disapprove. As shown in Figure 1, these ratings are slightly better for the President than in fall of 2010, though the difference is within both polls’ margins of error.

Figure 1:  
Tennessee presidential job approval for Obama since inauguration



Source: MTSU Poll

For comparison, Pollster.com's aggregate of national polls estimates job approval for Obama at 47 percent and disapproval at 48 percent as of February 28, 2011.

Unsurprisingly, political party is a powerful predictor of presidential job approval in Tennessee. Eighty-three percent of self-identified Democratic party member approve of the job Obama is doing as president, while only 17 percent disapprove. Meanwhile, only 11 percent of self-identified Republican party members approve of the job Obama is doing as president, while 89 percent disapprove. Among those who identify with some other party or who are independents, 39 percent approve while 61 percent disapprove. Among independents and third-party members, the main predictor of presidential job approval for Obama is cable news viewing. Among those who watch FOX News most, 93 percent disapprove of the job Obama is doing, while only 7 percent approve. Among independents and third party members who watch some other station most, 52 percent approve of the job Obama is doing, while 48 percent disapprove.

**President Obama and Congressional Republicans still not doing enough to cooperate, Tennesseans say**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

A plurality of Tennesseans, 48 percent, say that President Obama is not doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress, while only 41 percent say that he is doing enough to cooperate. On the surface this appears to be a slight improvement in cooperation evaluation for the president over last fall's poll, when only a 33 percent of Tennesseans said he was doing enough to cooperate, and 51 percent said that he wasn't. However, these differences are within the two polls' margins of error. Attempts at bipartisanship have been a major theme in Obama's discussion of American politics since he was on the campaign trail.

Republicans in Congress, though, get worse ratings for cooperation, with 56 percent of Tennesseans saying they are not doing enough to cooperate and only 28 percent saying they are. This would also seem to suggest an improvement over last fall's poll, when 61 percent said that they were not doing enough to cooperate, and only 23 percent said that they were doing enough. But again, these differences are within the two polls' margins of error.

As one might expect, a broad majority of Democrats (77 percent ) think Obama is doing enough to cooperate with Republicans, while a majority of Republicans (57 percent) think that congressional Republicans are doing enough to cooperate with the president. Majorities of independents say that Obama is not doing enough to cooperate with Republicans (60 percent) and that Republicans are not doing enough to cooperate with Obama (65 percent). But as with presidential job approval (see above), independents' opinion on this issue seems to be driven primarily by where they get their news. A large majority of independents who get most of their news from FOX News Channel say that Obama is not doing enough to cooperate with Republicans (93 percent), while a slim majority of those who get their news from some other source say that the president is doing enough to cooperate (51 percent). Independents who primarily watch FOX News are evenly split on whether Republicans are doing enough to cooperate with Obama (50 percent say yes, 50 percent say no), but a majority of independents who get their news from some other source say that Republicans are not doing enough to cooperate (71 percent).

**More Tennesseans approve of new governor, legislature than disapprove**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

A plurality of 43 percent of Tennesseans say that they approve of the job that new governor Bill Haslam is doing. Only 17 percent disapprove, but a large proportion have yet to make up their minds, with 39 percent saying that they don't know whether they approve of the job that he is doing or not. Most Republicans, 54 percent, approve of the job Haslam has done so far, but pluralities of independents (43 percent) and Democrats (37 percent) say that they don't know if they approve or not.

The same number overall, 43 percent, approve of the job the Tennessee State Legislature is doing. But 28 percent of Tennesseans disapprove of the job the Legislature is doing, markedly more than disapprove of the governor. Still, those who approve of the Legislature easily outnumber those who disapprove. Another 28 percent of Tennesseans don't know whether they approve of the legislature or not at this point. Approval is, again, partisan. A plurality of independents (37 percent) and a majority of Republicans (56 percent) approve of the Legislature, while a plurality of Democrats (43 percent) disapprove.

**Tennesseans say environment good, sufficiently protected, and secondary to economic growth**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Only 10 percent of Tennesseans rate environmental quality in the state as “poor.” Thirty-one percent say that it is “fair,” and a plurality of 46 percent say that it is “good.” Another 10 percent rate environmental quality in the state as “excellent.”

When asked about the state’s current laws dealing with the environment, 27 percent say the laws are “under-protective” of the environment, while 10 percent say that they are “over-protective” of the environment. A plurality of 48 percent say that Tennessee’s environmental laws are “about right.”

However, if forced to choose, Tennesseans tend to give economic growth priority over the environment. Forty-nine percent give the economy priority, while only 27 percent give the environment priority. The only group where most (66 percent) prioritize the environment above the economy consists of individuals with more than a high school education who read newspapers relatively frequently and don’t watch FOX News.

**Economy remains top concern at state and national levels**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Economic troubles continue to dominate the list of problems that Tennesseans consider most pressing. Fifty-five percent of state residents name the economy as the number-one problem facing the nation, and a 34 percent plurality consider it the number-one problem facing the state. No single other issue comes close to rivaling the economy as the top national problem. At the state level, two issues tie for a distant second place: education, at 12 percent, and health insurance and services, at 11 percent.

About as many Tennesseans (54 percent) named the economy as the top national problem in last fall’s MTSU Poll. But the 34 percent of Tennesseans who now name the economy as the top state problem represents a decline from the 48 percent who did so just last fall.

Given Tennesseans’ focus on the sour national economy, it’s not surprising that a substantial 78 percent of state residents say they are dissatisfied “with the way things are going in the United States at this time.” The proportion is about the same as this time a year ago, when the Spring 2010 MTSU Poll found 72 percent dissatisfied with the way things were going in the country.

Compared to Tennesseans’ assessment of how things are going nationally, their take on how things are going at the state level is substantially brighter. A 46 percent plurality say they are satisfied “with the way things are going in Tennessee at this time,” 39 percent say they are dissatisfied, and the rest are undecided. These percentages are similar to those from a year ago, when 43 percent felt satisfied, 46 percent felt dissatisfied, and the rest weren’t sure.

**Tea Party approval edges downward, membership remains low**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Just over one in four Tennesseans (26 percent) hold a favorable view of the Tea Party movement, down somewhat from the 30 percent who favored the movement last fall and the 29 percent who expressed approval last spring. Given the poll’s error margin, the downtick could be at least partly due to random sampling variation. But approval of the movement is clearly not on the rise in Tennessee, despite the movement’s continued ability to attract national news media coverage.

If there’s good news in the data for the movement, it’s that a 51 percent majority of Tennesseans simply haven’t made up their minds about it. Twenty-two percent of state residents describe themselves as “undecided” about the Tea Party, and another 30 percent say they “haven’t heard enough” yet to make up their minds. Just under a quarter (23 percent) expressly disapprove of the movement.

Significantly more self-described political conservatives (51 percent) approve of the Tea Party compared to political moderates and liberals, where approval hovers around 11 percent. Among moderates, disapproval rises as attention to public affairs increases, suggesting that, within this segment of the state population, familiarity with the movement breeds contempt.

Meanwhile, only about 8 percent of state residents consider themselves members of the Tea Party, a figure statistically comparable to the 7 percent estimate in last fall's poll and the 9 percent estimate in last spring's poll. Like Tea Party approval, Tea Party membership does not appear on the rise in Tennessee.

### Sample and method

The poll was conducted by telephone Feb. 14 – 26, 2011 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 589 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 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 sample data after weighting:

	<b>Census Percent</b>	<b>Unadjusted Sample Percent</b>	<b>Adjusted Sample Percent</b>
<b>Age:</b>			
<b>18-34</b>	29.9	13.9	29.9
<b>35-49</b>	27.7	24.0	27.6
<b>50-64</b>	25.0	36.0	24.8
<b>65+</b>	17.5	26.1	17.7
<b>Race:</b>			
<b>White</b>	81.9	86.7	81.9
<b>Black</b>	15.6	8.5	15.7
<b>Other</b>	2.5	4.9	2.5
<b>Gender:</b>			
<b>Male</b>	48.0	45.2	47.6
<b>Female</b>	52.0	54.8	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.