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## MTSU Poll Report, Fall 2011

**Three Republican frontrunners all have double-digit leads over Obama.** If the 2012 presidential election were held today, all three presumptive Republican frontrunners would likely defeat President Obama in the state of Tennessee. Romney leads by the most, followed by Perry and Cain. Republican leads are slightly greater among likely voters than the general public. *(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

**President Obama's job approval hits all-time low, disapproval climbs to all-time high in Tennessee.** More than twice as many disapprove as approve. Likely voters respond similarly to Tennesseans in general. Most Democrats still approve of the president, but majorities of Republicans and, perhaps most importantly, independents disapprove. *(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

**Most Tennesseans aware of new voter ID law, but many confused about the details.** Just under three in four Tennesseans say they have heard that state residents who go to vote will be asked to show a photo ID starting in 2012. Many are unclear about the new law's details, though. *(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

**Leave lottery-funded college scholarships alone for now, most say.** Most Tennesseans favor letting the state's lottery-funded college scholarship program continue to offset its annual operating deficits by drawing upon its reserves. Alternative proposals receive less than majority support. *(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

**Governor Haslam has Tennessee's approval as first year in office draws to a close.** A narrow majority approves, but few disapprove. Considerable portions remain undecided about Haslam's job performance among independents, Democrats, and the general public. *(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

**Tennesseans divided on the state legislature's job performance.** About the same proportions of Tennesseans approve as disapprove as say they don't know or refuse answer. *(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

**Tennesseans' dim view of Washington cooperation persists, especially on the possibility of job creation.** A majority of Tennesseans say President Obama isn't doing enough to cooperate with Congressional Republicans, but even more say Congressional Republicans aren't doing enough to cooperate with Obama. Most see agreement between the two parties on job creation as unlikely. More think Republicans would do better at job creation than Democrats, but most think Obama inherited the current economy more than he created it. Results are similar among likely voters. *(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

**Tennesseans: Cut spending and raise taxes – but not taxes on the rich.** Sixty-seven percent favor tax increases and spending cuts to lower the deficit. But a plurality would spare the rich. *(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

**Dissatisfaction with national economy and direction high and rising.** Concern about the national economy and dissatisfaction with the direction of the country continue to rise. *(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

**Happy with your local public schools? A lot depends on where you live.** Tennesseans living in the counties ringing Metro Nashville give their local public schools a "B." Those in Nashville give theirs a "C." Public schools elsewhere in the state get a C-plus. Also, Middle and East Tennesseans consider their local schools better than the state norm, while West Tennesseans consider their local schools worse than the state norm. *(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

## Detailed Findings

### Three Republican frontrunners all have double-digit leads over Obama

(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)

Tennesseans prefer any of the three current presumptive Republican frontrunners to President Obama in next year's presidential election. In hypothetical head-to-heads, Mitt Romney leads Obama 44 percent to 29 percent, Rick Perry leads Obama 41 percent to 28 percent, and Herman Cain leads Obama 39 percent to 28 percent. In all three cases, the Republicans' leads on Obama are outside the poll's margin of error, meaning that significantly more Tennesseans prefer the respective Republican challengers. Depending on the question, between 14 and 16 percent of Tennesseans volunteered that they would vote for neither candidate, and between 14 and 19 percent say they don't know how they would vote if the election were held today or refused to answer.

The Republicans' leads are slightly greater among likely voters, with 48 percent saying they would vote for Romney over 30 percent for Obama, 45 percent saying they would vote for Perry over 30 percent for Obama, and 44 percent saying they would vote for Cain over 30 percent for Obama. Between 11 and 15 percent of likely voters volunteered that they would vote for neither Obama nor the Republican candidate in the question, and between 11 and 14 percent said that they didn't know whom they would vote for or refused to answer, depending on the question.

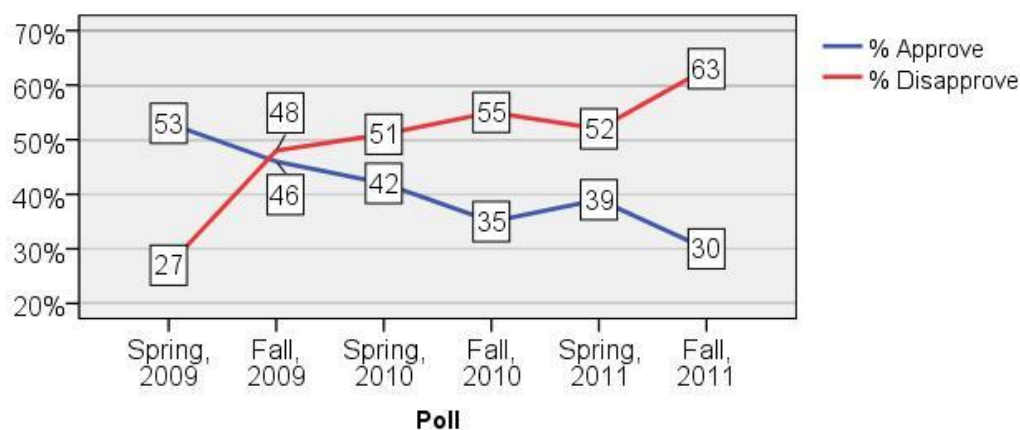
Thus, at this point Obama's campaign faces an uphill struggle against any seemingly plausible Republican challenger if the president is to win the state of Tennessee in 2012, which he lost to John McCain 57 percent to 42 percent in 2008.

### President Obama's job approval hits all-time low, disapproval climbs to all-time high in Tennessee

(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)

For the first time since President Obama's inauguration in 2009, more than twice as many Tennesseans disapprove of the job he is doing as president than approve. Fully 63 percent now say that they disapprove of the job that the president is doing, while only 30 percent say they approve, with the rest saying they don't know whether they approve or disapprove, or refusing to answer the question. As shown in Figure 1, these responses indicate a marked increase in disapproval and decline in approval since the spring 2011 poll (the differences are outside of both polls' margins of error), and all-time high disapproval and low approval numbers in the state for the job Obama is doing as president.

Figure 1:  
Tennessee presidential job approval for Obama since inauguration



Source: MTSU Poll

For comparison, Pollster.com's aggregate of polls estimates job approval for President Obama nationally at 42 percent and disapproval at 53 percent as of October 14, 2011.

Results were similar among Tennessee's likely voters, with 66 percent saying that they disapprove of the job Obama is doing as president, and only 30 percent saying that they approve.

Tennessee's self-identified Democrats, 67 percent of whom approve while 25 percent disapprove, do not appear to have abandoned Obama, despite some decisions by the administration that have been characterized in the media as unpopular with the party's liberal base. Nor do the administration's policies or initiatives appear to have endeared Obama to Tennessee's self-identified Republicans, a whopping 89 percent of whom disapprove of the job Obama is doing while a tiny 6 percent of whom approve. Independents also disapprove of the job the president is doing by a broad margin, 66 percent compared to only 26 percent who approve.

### **Most Tennesseans aware of new voter ID law, but many confused about the details**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Just under three in four Tennesseans say they have heard that state residents who go to vote will be asked to show a photo ID starting in 2012. About half or fewer, however, know such specifics about the law as whether valid forms of ID include an expired Tennessee driver's license, a University of Tennessee student ID, or an employee ID issued by a private-sector company.

Overall, 71 percent of Tennessee adults say they have heard about the new law. Twenty-eight percent say they have not, and the remaining 1 percent give no answer or say they aren't sure.

Reported awareness of the law is significantly lower among Tennesseans age 39 and younger, a bare majority (51 percent) of whom say they know about the law. Among Tennesseans in this age group who read a newspaper four times a week or less, awareness falls to 44 percent.

Among Tennesseans age 40 or older, by contrast, awareness stands at about 83 percent – 90 percent among those who read a newspaper daily. The poll detected no differences in reported awareness of the law among race, education, income and gender groupings. Democrats, independents and Republicans also were statistically equally likely to say they know about the law.

Knowledge levels about the law's specifics, though, vary significantly, both in general and among key demographic and political groupings. For example, fully 92 percent know – or correctly guessed, even though the poll questionnaire specifically asked respondents not to guess – that a valid Tennessee driver's license will be an acceptable form of ID. A similarly high 78 percent correctly asserted that a valid U.S. military photo ID will be acceptable.

However, a bare 51 percent majority knew that a "valid employee ID issued by a major automaker to a worker at one of its Tennessee plants" would be unacceptable. Only 32 percent knew that "a valid University of Tennessee student identification card" would be unacceptable. And a scant 14 percent knew that an expired Tennessee driver's license would be acceptable. The presentation order of the five knowledge items was randomized for each respondent.

The five questions about different forms of ID were used to form a test of knowledge about the new law, where poll respondents could score between 0 and 5 points. Overall, Tennesseans with some trade school education, a high school diploma or less averaged significantly lower (2.5 out of 5) on this test of specific knowledge about the law than did better-educated Tennesseans (2.8 out of 5). Positive relationships between education and knowledge about public affairs are common in public opinion results. Meanwhile, among lesser-educated Tennesseans, women averaged significantly lower (2.3) than men (2.7). Age, race and income made no difference here. But political orientation did, with those on the political right averaging significantly better (2.8 out of 5) than those in the middle or on the political left (2.6 out of 5).

**Leave lottery-funded college scholarships alone for now, most say**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Most Tennesseans (55 percent) favor letting the state's lottery-funded college scholarship program continue to offset its annual operating deficits by drawing upon its reserves until after the economy improves.

Each of several alternative proposals received less than majority support, with 46 percent favoring offering scholarships only to those students whose families earn \$150,000 a year or less, 38 percent favoring making scholarship qualifications more stringent, and 22 percent favoring reducing the \$4,000 per year that most lottery scholarship holders receive.

The poll randomly rotated the options – all of which have been suggested by various state lawmakers – after an introduction explaining that the program offers lottery-funded college scholarship to residents who finish high school with at least a B average or who make at least a mid-range score on the SAT or ACT college entrance exams. The introduction also explained that the program has been losing money but has enough funds in reserve to continue operating for about 10 years.

Income is the best predictor of support for taking a “wait and see” approach to the lottery scholarship program's finances, with Tennesseans earning more than \$40,000 expressing the most support for relying on the program's reserves. The next-most-popular solution, imposing a \$150,000 income cap on scholarship recipients, enjoys significantly more support among self-described political liberals than among self-described conservatives. As for making scholarship qualifications more stringent, the best predictor is race, with 41 percent of whites expressing support compared to just 9 percent of minorities. Political orientation reappears as the best predictor of support for cutting the size of lottery scholarship awards, with 19 percent of liberals and moderates favoring award cuts compared to 27 percent of conservatives.

**Governor Haslam has Tennessee's approval as first year in office draws to a close**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Fifty-one percent of Tennesseans approve of the job Bill Haslam is doing as the state's governor. Although this is the narrowest of majorities, it dwarfs by more than 3 to 1 the portion of Tennesseans who say that they disapprove of the job Governor Haslam is doing (16 percent). However, a noteworthy slice of the Tennessee population, 33 percent, has yet to express a decisive opinion about the job Haslam is doing as governor, opting instead to say they don't know or would rather not answer the question.

Opinions among Tennessee's independents are similar to those of Tennesseans in general. A 48 percent plurality of independents approve of the job Haslam is doing, while only 16 percent disapprove, and 36 percent don't know or refuse to answer. Ambivalence toward Haslam is greatest among Tennessee's Democrats, a 39 percent plurality of whom either don't know whether they approve or disapprove of the job Haslam is doing, or decline to answer the question, as compared to 33 percent who approve and 29 percent who disapprove. Unsurprisingly, a broad majority of Governor Haslam's fellow Republicans in the state, 71 percent, approve of the job he is doing, while only 7 percent disapprove, and 21 percent don't know whether they approve or disapprove, or decline to answer the question.

**Tennesseans divided on the state legislature's job performance**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

Asked about the job the state Legislature is doing, Tennesseans are almost evenly divided into three groups that approve (39 percent), disapprove (30 percent), and don't know whether they approve or disapprove or refuse to answer the question (32 percent). Likely voters are similarly ambivalent, with 40 percent saying they approve, 32 percent saying they disapprove, and 28 percent saying they don't know or refusing to answer the question.

A majority of Tennessee's Democrats disapprove (54 percent), while a majority of the state's Republicans (55 percent) approve of the Republican-dominated Legislature. A plurality of independents, 38 percent, approve, while 28 percent disapprove, and 34 percent don't know or refuse to answer.

**Tennesseans' dim view of Washington cooperation persists, especially on the possibility of job creation**

*(Contact: Jason Reineke, 615.494.7746)*

A majority of Tennesseans (53 percent) say President Obama is not doing enough to cooperate with Republicans in Congress, while only about a third (34 percent) say he is doing enough. However, Tennesseans say congressional Republicans are even worse when it comes to cooperation, with only one in five (20 percent) saying Republicans in Congress are doing enough cooperate with President Obama, and two-thirds (66 percent) saying they are not. The remainders say they either don't know or refused to answer the respective questions.

Sixty-four percent of Tennesseans say the economy and jobs are the number one national problems, but they are pessimistic about Washington's ability to agree on a solution to the jobs problem. Only 27 percent say they are either very or somewhat confident that Democrats and Republicans will be able to agree on a jobs bill, while a 69 percent majority say they are either not too confident, or not at all confident, in Democrats' and Republicans' ability to do so.

So, if cooperation and agreement are unlikely, whom do Tennesseans think should win out? A plurality, 42 percent, say Republicans are more likely to create new jobs. In contrast, only 24 percent of Tennesseans say Democrats are more likely to do so. Perhaps related to the parties' inability to cooperate, 14 percent of Tennesseans volunteer that neither party is likely to create new jobs. Another 3 percent volunteer that both parties are likely to create new jobs. The rest of the general public in Tennessee say they don't know who is likely to create more new jobs or refused to answer the question.

Despite the greater prevalence of the belief that Republicans are more likely to create new jobs than Democrats, most Tennesseans do not blame President Obama for the nation's current economic woes. A narrow majority, 51 percent, say the current economic conditions are something that Obama inherited, whereas only 32 percent say these conditions are the result of Obama's own policies. The rest either don't know or refuse to answer the question. For comparison, a McClatchy-Marist Poll conducted nationally in September found that 60 percent of all Americans thought Obama mostly inherited the poor economic conditions, while 34 percent said the poor economy stemmed mostly from Obama's own policies, and 6 percent were unsure.

Among likely voters in Tennessee, for whom job creation and economic blame seem probable factors in their 2012 vote choice, results regarding these issues were quite similar to those for the general public. Forty-four percent of likely voters say Republicans are more likely to create new jobs, while only 24 percent say Democrats are more likely to do so. Fifty percent of likely voters say the current economic conditions are mostly something Obama inherited, while 35 percent say conditions are mostly the result of Obama's own policies.

**Tennesseans: Cut spending and raise taxes – but not taxes on the rich**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Just over two-thirds (67 percent) of Tennesseans think any plan to reduce the federal budget deficit should include a combination of both tax increases and spending cuts. Twenty-four percent favor relying solely on spending cuts, and 2 percent prefer tax increases alone. The rest weren't sure.

These findings are similar to those of a CBS News / New York Times national poll conducted last month that found 71 percent of Americans favoring a combination of tax increases and spending cuts, 21 percent favoring spending cuts only, and 3 percent favoring tax increases only.

As in the CBS News / New York Times national poll, these attitudes polarize along political party lines in Tennessee, with 83 percent of Democrats favoring a combination of tax increases and spending cuts, compared to 71 percent of independents and others, and 48 percent of Republicans. Among Republicans, a 51 percent majority of men favor only spending cuts, while a 49 percent plurality of women prefer the mixed approach.

Tennesseans' enthusiasm for combating the deficit with both spending cuts and tax increases does not translate into support for increasing taxes on households earning \$250,000 or more, though. Forty-one percent say they would support such a tax increase, but a statistically greater 49 percent say they would not, and the rest aren't sure. The

same CBS News / New York Times national poll found 56 percent Americans willing to raise taxes on households earning \$250,000 or more, and only 37 percent opposed.

Again, as in the national results, political ideology plays a significant role in these attitudes in Tennessee. Sixty-six percent of Tennessee's Democrats favor raising taxes on households earning \$250,000 or more, compared to 41 percent of independents and others, and only 23 percent of Republicans.

**Dissatisfaction with national economy and direction high and rising**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Most (56 percent) of Tennessee's residents rate the national economy as "poor," and 38 percent rate it as "only fair." A scant 4 percent consider it "good," and less than 1 percent call it "excellent." The rest aren't sure. Reflecting concern about the national economy, fully 82 percent of Tennesseans are "dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time," while just 10 percent are "satisfied." The rest aren't sure. Not surprisingly, economic issues top the list of perceived problems facing both the nation and the state of Tennessee.

The figures represent an increase in negativity about the economy and the nation's direction since our Spring 2011 poll, in which 50 percent rated the national economy as "poor," and 43 percent rated it as "only fair." In the same poll, 78 percent expressed dissatisfaction with the way things were going in the nation.

As in previous polls, though, Tennesseans are somewhat less negative about the state's economy and general direction. A quarter (25 percent) consider the state's economy "poor," and 55 percent consider it "only fair." Just 16 percent call the state economy "good," and a scant 2 percent characterize it as "excellent." Meanwhile, 45 percent are satisfied with how things are going in the state, and 41 percent are dissatisfied. Fourteen percent don't know, and the rest give no answer. Here, only minimal differences are apparent compared to our spring poll's results.

**Happy with your local public schools? A lot depends on where you live.**

*(Contact: Ken Blake, 615.210.6187)*

Three things matter when it comes to how Tennesseans regard public school quality: location, location, and location.

The highest marks for local public school quality come from Tennesseans who live in the counties ringing Metro Nashville, who rate the quality of their local public schools at about a "B." But residents living in Metro Nashville itself give their local public schools about a C.

Meanwhile, Tennesseans living elsewhere in the state give their local public schools about a C-plus on average, although local public school ratings among this segment of Tennesseans tend to be lower for large metro areas and for small rural areas than for moderately urban areas.

In yet another geographic breakdown, Middle Tennessee residents tend to rate their local public schools about a third of a point higher on average than they rate state's public schools overall. By contrast, East Tennesseans rate their local public schools only about a fifth of a point higher than they rate the state's public schools overall, and West Tennesseans rate their local public schools about a quarter of a point lower than they rate the state's public schools overall. Thus, Middle and East Tennesseans see their local public schools as a bit better than the state norm, while West Tennesseans see their local public schools as a bit worse than the state norm.

Asked to compare the education that children get in Tennessee's public schools today with the quality of the education they themselves received, 41 percent say the state's public schools offer a worse education, 21 percent say it's about the same, and 34 percent say it's better. The rest aren't sure. A similar pattern appears when Tennesseans are asked about their community's local public schools. Thirty-five percent say their local public schools offer most children a worse education than the one they themselves received, 25 percent say it's about the same, and 32 percent say it's better. The rest aren't sure.

By this measure, though, Tennesseans who have the most direct experience with the state's present-day public schools seem to be the most positive. About half (49 percent) of state residents who live in a household that presently includes at least one public school student think Tennessee now offers a better public education than the

education they themselves received. By contrast, the figure drops to 26 percent among Tennesseans whose households don't include a current public school student. A similar contrast appears when Tennesseans are asked about the education their local public schools provide.

Of course, ordinary citizens' perceptions of school quality may or may not correspond to more direct measures of school quality. But these attitudes are notable nonetheless in that they likely inform political leaders' policy decisions regarding the state's public schools.

### Sample and method

Poll interviews were conducted by telephone Oct. 3-14, 2011 by students in the College of Mass Communication at Middle Tennessee State University. Students interviewed 640 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	12.3	29.6
<b>35-49</b>	27.7	25.8	28.0
<b>50-64</b>	25.0	31.0	24.9
<b>65+</b>	17.5	31.0	17.4
<b>Race:</b>			
<b>White</b>	81.9	85.1	82.0
<b>Black</b>	15.6	10.1	15.6
<b>Other</b>	2.5	4.8	2.4
<b>Gender:</b>			
<b>Male</b>	48.0	46.6	47.8
<b>Female</b>	52.0	53.4	52.2

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.