

Answers to a few “Frequently Asked Questions”

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1) How did you decide to begin polling Tennesseans on national and state political issues?

A key component of a democracy is giving voice to citizens' opinions so that the elected officials can better represent their constituents. The *Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions*, housed within Vanderbilt's College of Arts and Science, aspires to provide useful data on public opinion within the state to help inform the many important and ongoing public policy debates in the state and nation. It also hopes to encourage research on public opinion and the connection between public opinion and public policy.

2) How do you choose the questions and the wording of the questions? How do you decide how to order the questions? Do you think the questions may lead respondents to answer in particular ways?

It is well known that how you ask a question can affect the answers you get. Because we are interested in what the public thinks – not how they react to leading questions -- we ask questions that have been previously tested to ensure that the opinions we get are not sensitive to how we ask the question as much as possible. We have also created a bi-partisan advisory board that reviews our questions to ensure that our poll is non-partisan and the questions are fair.

While we ask a few key questions in every poll, our questions can change over time because scholars use the poll for research purposes and different scholars are interested in different questions.

3) Why do your results sometimes include all Tennesseans, sometimes just registered voters, and sometimes just likely voters?

Again, while our poll is a public service, we also use it to conduct political science research. Knowing the opinions of all Tennesseans, regardless of whether they are likely to vote, is useful for assessing the performance of representative governance and comparing the opinions of voters and non-voters. The opinions of registered voters are often important for understanding the opinion of the electorate. Likely voters are used when we are attempting to predict an election outcome. Because most of our polls are not intended as a prediction (in part because they occur so far in advance of the election), we rarely use likely voters.

3) How can 700 or so people reflect the opinion of all of TN?

A truly remarkable result from statistics is the fact that a random sample can accurately measure the average opinion of a much larger group.

The issue is whether the people who respond to our polls are a random sample of Tennesseans, or whether they differ in important respects. Although every telephone number in Tennessee has the same chance of being called by our poll, we know that the people who are most willing to take surveys are more educated, more female, and older than average. Public opinion scholars have studied this long-standing issue and they have developed methods to try and ensure that the average opinion of the poll reflects the average opinion in the state by “weighting” the responses based on the gender, age, education, and the region of the state where the respondent is from (i.e., Eastern, Western or Middle Tennessee). “Weights” help count the responses of some individuals more than others to make sure that the demographics of the weighted sample reflects the demographics of the state.

4) How do you contact people? How long does an average survey take?

We use professionally trained call centers to contact the randomly generated telephone numbers. We often call on both landlines and cellphones because it is possible that those who have only cell phones are different than those that have traditional landlines. Because it is important to contact working household numbers, we call each randomly selected number up to 5 times to try to interview a randomly selected person from the household. We are very careful when constructing the poll to ensure that it does not take much longer than 15 minutes to complete.

5) What is a split ballot design (i.e., why do some questions have more respondents than others)?

A “split-ballot” design is one way that scholars of public opinion can help identify how important particular words or concepts are for shaping public opinion. We can ask a question that is identical but for a slight change in how the question is asked to see how the slight change affects voter opinion.

For example, in our June 2011 poll we asked two very similar questions that were randomly assigned to respondents: “The Tennessee State Legislature debated a bill that would allow grocery stores to sell wine. The legislature decided to take up the issue again next year. Should grocery stores be allowed to sell wine?” and “The Tennessee State Legislature debated a bill that would allow grocery stores to sell wine. Opponents argue that it would benefit large chain stores while hurting small locally-owned businesses. What is your opinion? Should grocery stores be allowed to sell wine?” By comparing the responses to these two questions we can see how exposing respondents to the phrase “Opponents argue that it would benefit large chain stores while hurting small locally-owned businesses” affects public opinion.