

Media Inquiries: Damon Maida, 615-322-NEWS
damon.maida@vanderbilt.edu

Vanderbilt Poll finds Tennesseans broadly united on key issues, economic insecurity top of mind for many

Tennesseans across the political spectrum continue to broadly agree on many key issues, including on the seriousness of the opioid crisis, the need for improved screening for gun purchases and the importance of childcare, according to results from the [Fall 2019 Vanderbilt University Poll](#). They also agree that the state's economy is strong and that Gov. Bill Lee is doing a good job.

"Time and time again, this poll has shown how pragmatic Tennesseans are," said [John Geer](#), Ginny and Conner Searcy Dean of the College of Arts and Science, professor of political science and co-director of the Vanderbilt Poll. "When they see a problem, they want to come together to fix it. What we find is that there is a lot of low-hanging fruit for policymakers, even on some very challenging topics."

The poll results also revealed that while 84 percent of Tennesseans said the state's economy is in good shape, a third of voters are still worried about making ends meet and a quarter struggle to pay for health care—even more so in rural communities.

The poll's findings are the result of a new set of questions about topics that impact voters personally, such as household debt and healthcare access.

"When you ask people to evaluate something as complicated as the economy, you don't actually know if they're including themselves in the equation," said poll co-director [Josh Clinton](#), Abby and Jon Winkelreid Professor of Political Science. "What this shows us is that even though most people feel like the state's doing well, it doesn't mean there aren't still serious issues facing Tennesseans across the state—especially in rural areas."

Approval ratings remain stable; Tennesseans divided on impeachment

Gov. Bill Lee remains very popular with voters, with a 62 percent approval rating, followed by the State Legislature at 56 percent, the poll found. On the national level, 46 percent of voters said they approve of the job Sen. Lamar Alexander was doing, while 44 percent said the same of Sen. Marsha Blackburn. Congress continued to struggle at 28 percent.

Consistent with previous polling, President Donald Trump received 50 percent approval in this round of surveys.

"Something new we're seeing is that he's dropped about 10 points in the suburbs," Geer said. "This reflects a broader trend of suburban discontent with President Trump across the country."

On the impeachment question, 58 percent said they believe his request that Ukraine investigate former Vice President Biden was improper, but there's disagreement on whether it is an impeachable offense and whether he should be removed from office. Thirty-five percent said the president should be impeached and removed from office, but opinions remain very polarized on this question, Geer said.

Opportunities for consensus

Addiction: 69 percent of voters said drug and alcohol dependence is the biggest problem in their community, and 68 percent approved of raising the legal age for tobacco to 21.

Gun policy: Virtually everyone agreed that guns should not be easier to buy; 47 percent said purchasing requirements should stay the same and 45 percent said they should be harder. An overwhelming majority—86 percent—approved of background checks for gun show and private gun sales. The same proportion supported bans for people with certain mental health problems, while 68 percent supported the creation of a universal database to track all gun purchases. By contrast, only 51 percent supported a ban on assault weapons.

“The most compelling thing about our findings on gun policy is that opinions haven’t really changed since we began asking about them in 2015,” Clinton said. “These are durable results.”

Nathan Bedford Forrest bust: Seventy-six percent of voters, with majorities from both parties, said the former Confederate officer’s bust should be removed from the Capitol. Forty-seven percent said it belonged in a museum, while 29 percent said it should not be displayed at all.

Subsidized childcare for working adults: When asked how the state should dedicate its nearly \$1 billion in unspent federal anti-poverty funds, subsidized childcare emerged as the top priority by a significant margin. Forty-one percent, across all income and political backgrounds, chose childcare. The next most popular choice, job training, received 27 percent support, and the third, fighting the opioid epidemic, got 16 percent.

Kitchen-table worries reveal significant challenges

Health care: About a quarter of Tennesseans said they struggle with affording health care. Twenty-eight percent said they have unpaid medical bills, while 24 percent said they’ve put off care due to cost. There was a significant gender disparity, as well: while 17 percent of men said they’ve postponed care due to cost, 31 percent of women have.

TennCare is one way the state seeks to mitigate that problem. The poll showed that a new proposal to shift Medicaid funding to a block grant model is very poorly understood across the board—59 percent said they don’t even know enough to have an opinion about how TennCare should be funded.

“This tells us policymakers and journalists covering their actions haven’t done enough to communicate to voters,” said Geer. “This change in policy could affect a lot of people.”

Economic insecurity: Thirty-two percent of voters said they worried about paying for the basics, like food, shelter, utilities and transportation, while 52 percent reported being worried about not having enough to pay for emergencies. Fifty-three percent worry about affording college and retirement. And while 56 percent said everyone has an equal chance to get ahead, 40 percent disagreed, saying that today’s economy only rewards the people at the top.

Rural areas struggling hardest: Fifty-nine percent of rural voters said they worry about having enough to pay for emergencies, while 42 percent said they’re not sure they can meet their day-to-day needs and

39 percent said they have unpaid medical bills, which is much higher than people living in suburban and urban areas.

“Findings like these are why we wanted to ask voters more about their personal experiences,” said Clinton. “Despite the rosiness of some of our overall numbers about the economic conditions of Tennessee, its citizens tell us that that they are still concerned about their personal circumstances and that they face difficult challenges and choices.”

The survey of 1,000 demographically representative registered Tennessee voters was conducted Nov. 19-Dec. 5, 2019, and has a margin of error of ± 3.8 . Full results and methodology are available at vu.edu/poll.

About the Vanderbilt Poll

The Vanderbilt Poll is supported by the [Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions](#) at Vanderbilt University. The statewide poll is typically conducted just before the start of each legislative session and at the end of each session, in part to determine how closely the results of the session align with voters’ expectations and priorities. CSDI also conducts a yearly Nashville poll, as well as additional special polls. In 2015, the Vanderbilt Poll became a charter member of the [American Association for Public Opinion Research’s Transparency Initiative](#).

-VU-