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Partisanship shapes Tennesseans' coronavirus views: Vanderbilt Poll
Economic anxiety high; Trump leads Biden in early look

The partisanship of Tennesseans strongly influences their views on COVID-19, according to the latest [Vanderbilt Poll-Tennessee](#). The poll also found that economic worries abound as Tennesseans feel the financial effect of the safer-at-home order.

"It's really a tale of two cities, but instead of the urban-rural differences, we're seeing views really break much more along party lines," said [John Geer](#), Ginny and Conner Searcy Dean of the College of Arts and Science and co-director of the poll. "Tennessee remains a pragmatic state overall, but partisan beliefs are shaping responses to nonpartisan issues, like the coronavirus."

The survey of 1,000 registered Tennessee voters was conducted between May 5-22, 2020, with a margin of error of ± 3.8 percentage points. The statewide poll is conducted twice a year by [Vanderbilt University's Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions \(CSDI\)](#), directed by Geer and [Josh Clinton](#), Abby and Jon Winkelreid Professor of Political Science. Full results and methods can be found at vu.edu/poll.

Approval numbers stable amid pandemic

Tennesseans' views on their state and federal leaders have not changed much since the last poll, suggesting the pandemic has had limited effect on their standing. Gov. Bill Lee remains popular, at 64 percent. President Donald Trump's approval rating is 51 percent, which has held at this level during his entire time as president. Sen. Marsha Blackburn has 47 percent approval, while Sen. Lamar Alexander, in his final term, received 50 percent approval.

"These approval numbers are very much in line with earlier polls, and reflect stable support among Tennessee voters," Geer said. "And Sen. Alexander finishes a long and distinguished career with a slight uptick in support and a continued demonstration of bipartisan support, which reflects Tennessee's history of pragmatic politics."

Approval of pandemic response: Echoing the findings of the recent Vanderbilt Poll-Nashville, 75 percent of Tennesseans said they were satisfied with how their local leaders have responded to the coronavirus. Sixty-six percent said the same of their fellow community members, while 65 percent were satisfied with Gov. Lee's response and 53 percent were satisfied with President Trump's.

Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, gets high marks from Tennesseans: 65 percent approved of the job he's done so far—a finding consistent with the nationwide support he's received since the start of the pandemic.

Presidential preferences: If the election were held right now, 51 percent of Tennesseans would vote for Trump, while 42 percent would vote for former Vice President Joe Biden. Among Independents, Biden leads 46 to 41. Biden also holds a very slight edge among women—47 percent compared to 45 percent for Trump. Trump is the clear favorite among men, 57 to 35.

“The 2018 midterms revealed weaknesses in the GOP among women voters, and it doesn't look like they've totally solved that yet,” Clinton added. “President Trump is well-positioned to win Tennessee again, but six months out it's unclear whether he'll repeat the landslide victory he got in Tennessee in 2016 against Secretary Clinton.”

Mixed views on COVID-19

Overall, 60 percent of Tennesseans reported feeling very or somewhat worried that they or a loved one would contract COVID-19, while 67 percent said they were very or somewhat worried about a resurgence of the illness when social distancing guidelines began to ease.

Tennesseans were about evenly split on whether addressing the economic impact or the public health threat of COVID-19 was more important, though, and were similarly split on whether it was appropriate to let the safer-at-home order expire.

Polarization prevalent: Partisanship strongly affected Tennesseans' views on the coronavirus, the poll found. Eighty-two percent of Democrats were concerned about contracting COVID-19, compared to only 37 percent of Republicans. Seventy-nine percent of Republicans approved of lifting the stay-at-home order, but 78 percent of Democrats disagreed.

Race and gender mattered, too: 76 percent of people of color said they were concerned about coronavirus infecting them or their families, while only 55 percent of whites said the same. Sixty-six percent of women worried about the disease striking home, compared to 52 percent of men.

Reopening the economy: Tennesseans have nuanced views about what should reopen and what shouldn't. Fewer than half said restaurants, bars and churches should reopen, but two-thirds supported reopening both small and big stores. Just a quarter of Tennesseans were ready for the return of air travel, concerts or sporting events, however.

Again, Clinton said, party differences were clear. “When you look at who's most eager to reopen and go back to in-person dining at restaurants at this time, it's almost all Republicans. Democrats are far less likely to report being comfortable with going out, and Independents are in the middle,” he said. “The partisan split we see in who feels safe enough to return to

commercial activity has enormous implications for the economic recovery of the state. It is clear that not everyone feels safe going out yet, despite the state opening up.”

Voting during a pandemic: When asked about how best to facilitate the November election safely, 57 percent strongly or somewhat supported vote-by-mail, while 85 percent supported increasing time for early voting and a strong majority did not want to postpone the election. Both Democrats and Republicans agreed that the election should be held on time and that there should be additional time for early voting. “This finding underscores that not all issues spark a partisan response,” Geer said. “Tennesseans, collectively, have an underlying commitment to democracy.”

Economic anxieties high

Tennesseans are definitely feeling the economic pinch of the pandemic: Only 35 percent rated the U.S. economy very or fairly good this time, and just 51 percent rated the Tennessee economy the same way—compared to 81 and 84 percent in December. The proportion of Tennesseans who said the economy should be the state’s top priority jumped 18 points since December to 34 percent, reversing seven years of steady decline.

Household income worries: While just 28 percent said COVID-19 was a big public health problem in their own communities, 64 percent said its economic impact was. About one in 10 Tennesseans said they’ve had to take on more debt, had trouble paying for housing or had to apply for unemployment as a result of the pandemic.

Thirty-one percent of voters said they’re worried about not being able to pay their monthly bills, while 44 percent are worried about having enough for emergencies and 45 percent are worried about saving for education and retirement. Much of that concern was concentrated among people of color and those making less than \$45,000 a year, who both expressed nearly twice as much worry about meeting their monthly bills than Tennesseans overall.

“The pandemic is causing serious economic pain for Tennesseans who are already struggling,” Clinton said. “This shows that our leaders have to make some very tough choices about how to confront the disease and mitigate the significant economic fallout that’s resulted from it.”

ABOUT THE VANDERBILT POLL

The Vanderbilt Poll is supported by the [Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions](#) at Vanderbilt University. In 2015, the Vanderbilt Poll became a charter member of the [American Association for Public Opinion Research’s Transparency Initiative](#).