

*Answers to a few “Frequently Asked Questions”  
by Josh Clinton, Ph.D. and Co-Director of the Vanderbilt Poll*

*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.

*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 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.

*3) How do 700 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. Because it is important to contact working household numbers, we call each randomly selected number up to 5 times. If we reach someone in the household, we use established methods to randomly select an adult from the household to talk to. 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?*

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.

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