

## Vanderbilt University Poll Executive Summary

May 21, 2013

The Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Vanderbilt University has conducted its sixth Vanderbilt Poll of Tennesseans to find out what they think about our political leaders and pressing issues facing the state and federal government. It is imperative to gauge the public's thinking as elected leaders grapple with tough problems that face both the state and the nation.

We obtained telephone interviews with a representative sample of 813 registered voters. Telephone interviews were conducted by landlines and cell phones. The survey was conducted in English by Princeton Survey Research Associates International (PSRAI) from May 6 to May 13, 2013. The margin of error for the weighted sample is  $\pm 4.0$  percentage points.

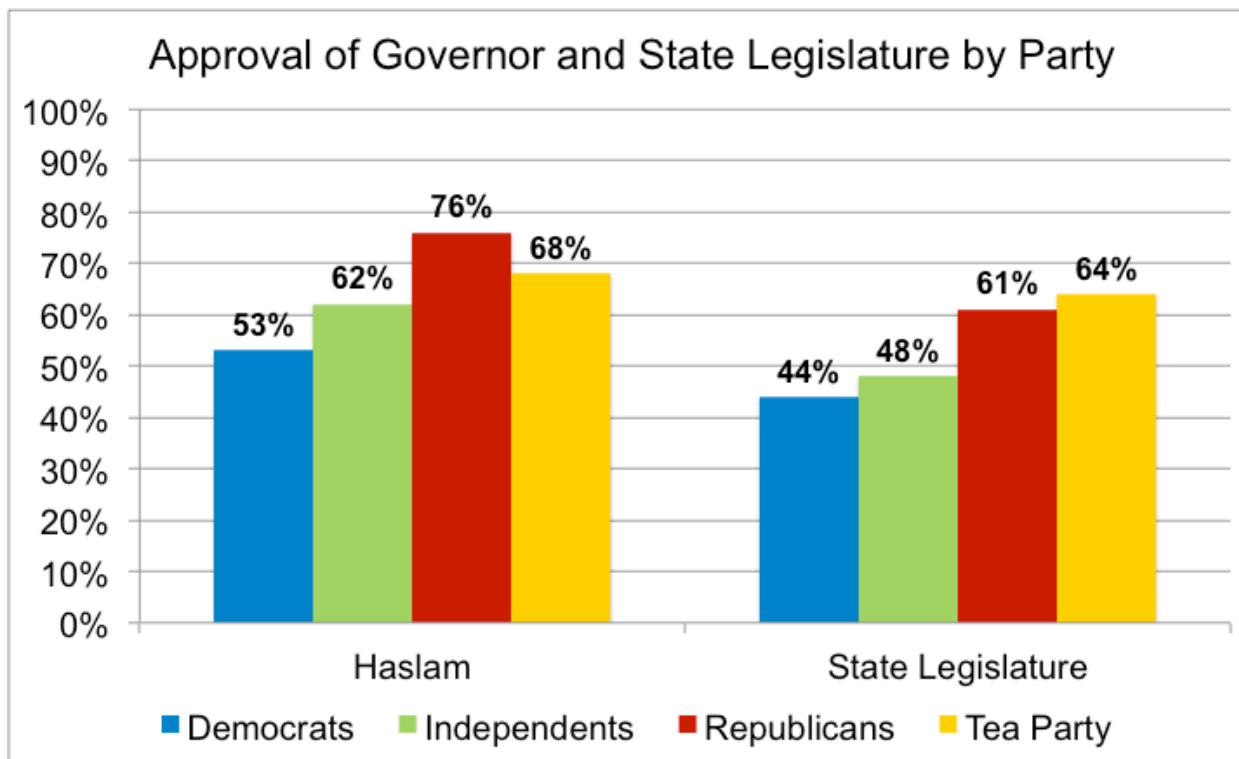
There are more than 41 different questions asked in this poll. Among registered voters, the key highlights are:

- Tennesseans continue to give high marks to their U.S. senators and governor.
- Tennesseans continue to see the economy as the top priority of the state, with education and health care vying for second place. Social issues such as guns, immigration, and gay rights are a distant fourth, but Tennesseans thought the legislature placed the second most emphasis on gun issues.
- Tennesseans want the state to run the Health Care Exchange that emerges from the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the support for a state-run exchange is stronger among Republicans than Democrats.
- Tennesseans support the expansion of Medicare that is tied to the ACA, but a bare majority, Republicans and members of the Tea Party, oppose the expansion.
- Tennesseans strongly support charter schools.
- Tennesseans are most likely to support a limited voucher program, as favored by the Governor.
- Tennesseans overwhelmingly support background checks for gun purchases. Support for other issues varies depending on whether the individual is a gun-owner.
- Tennesseans support the recent law that allows individuals to carry guns in their vehicles while on their employer's private property.
- Tennesseans are divided on whether online retailers should collect a sales tax.
- A narrow majority of Tennesseans think that the automatic spending cuts in the federal budget—the so-called sequestration—is bad for the country.
- Tennesseans favor letting citizens, rather than the governor, choose judges.
- Tennesseans overwhelmingly support the current primary system and oppose having the state legislature nominate candidates for US Senate.
- Tennesseans, by the slight margin, favor legal recognition of gay couples either through marriage or civil unions.
- A strong majority of Tennesseans believe gay couples should have access to partner benefits at their place of work.
- Only about a quarter of Tennesseans realize that our state taxes are among the lowest in the 50 states.
- Tennesseans strongly favor allowing grocery stores to sell wine.

## Approval of State Political Figures:

Governor Haslam's support continues to be strong among registered Tennessee voters. As of May 2012, 63% approve of his performance. A year ago his support stood at 64%. His support continues to be strong across party lines – 53% of Democrats, 62% of independents, and 76% of Republicans approve of his performance as Governor.

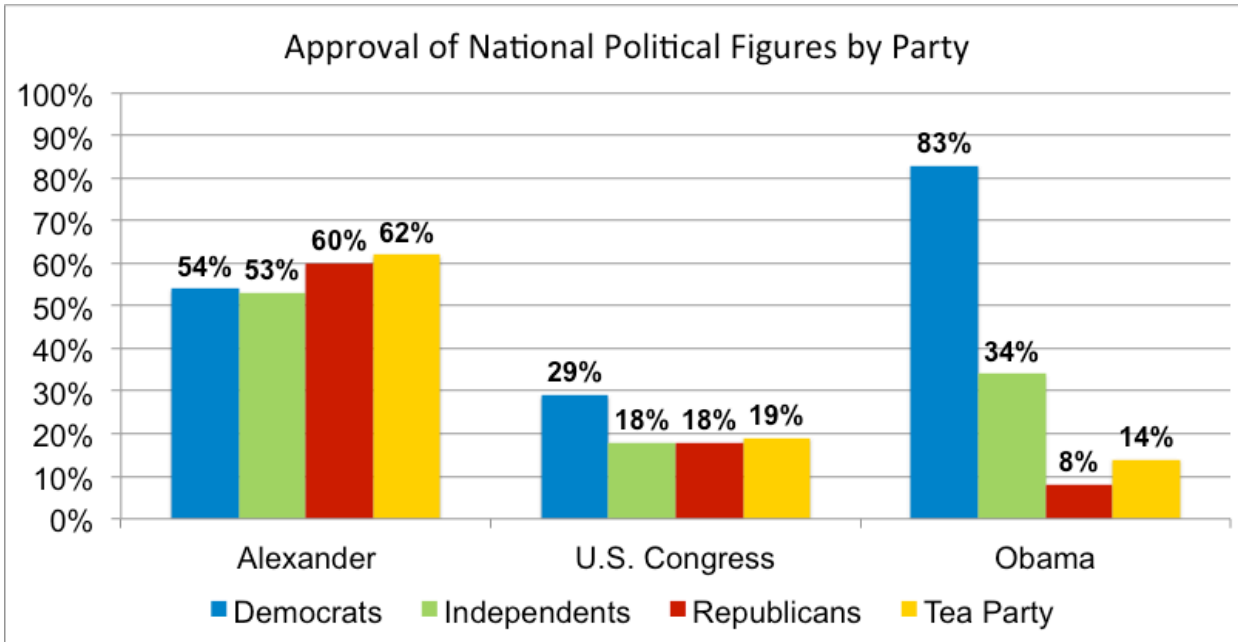
A narrow majority of registered voters (51%) approve of the Tennessee state legislature. The support for the state legislature is divided along party lines -- 61% of Republicans approve of the performance of the state legislature, but only 48% of independents and 44% of Democrats approve of the job it is doing. Though the differences are small, the state legislature enjoys the most support among self-identified members of the Tea Party.



## Approval of National Political Figures

Registered voters in Tennessee continue to support Senators Alexander and Corker by a wide margin. Corker and Alexander's approval has remained largely steady at 53% since we first asked it in November 2011. Alexander enjoys a majority of support among all groups of voters and suggests that he will likely be difficult to beat in either a primary or the general election.

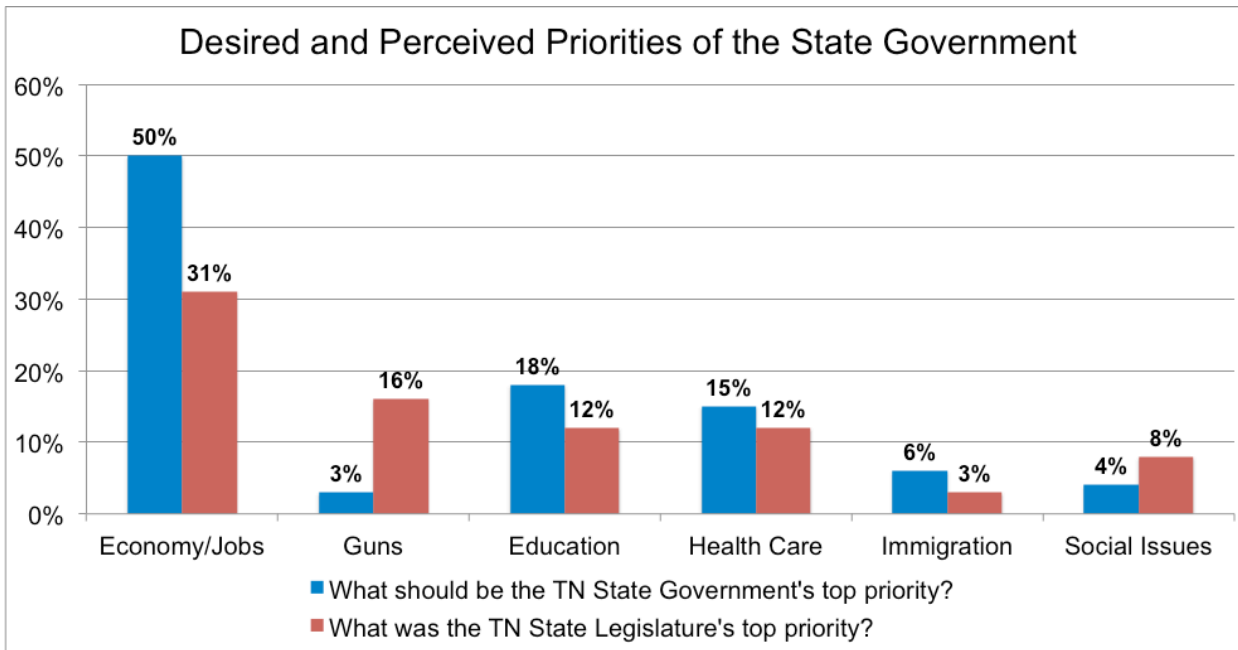
President Obama and the U.S. Congress continue to be widely panned by most registered Tennessee voters. Obama's approval has dipped to 40% from 45% in Tennessee over the last six months and the approval of the U.S. Congress remains mired at 21% – a level of support that had remained largely unchanged since November 2011.



**State Priorities:**

Tennesseans once again report that the economy is their top concern. Nearly 50% report that the economy is the top priority for state government – a priority that has never wavered since November of 2011. Concerns about education and health care remain the second and third most important priorities at 18% and 15% respectively.

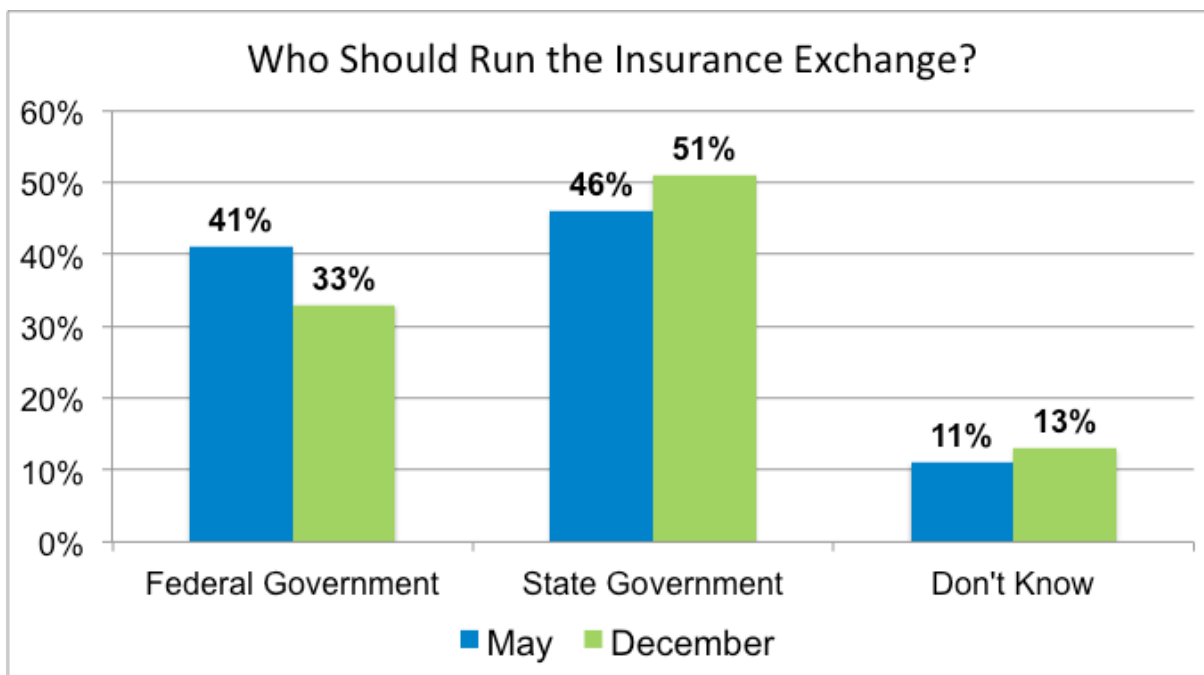
When asked what registered voters *thought* the Tennessee state legislature spent the most time on, only 31% said the economy. Many thought that the top priority of the state legislature was gun-related issues (16%). Education (12%), and health care (12%) trailed behind as the top priorities of the state legislature.



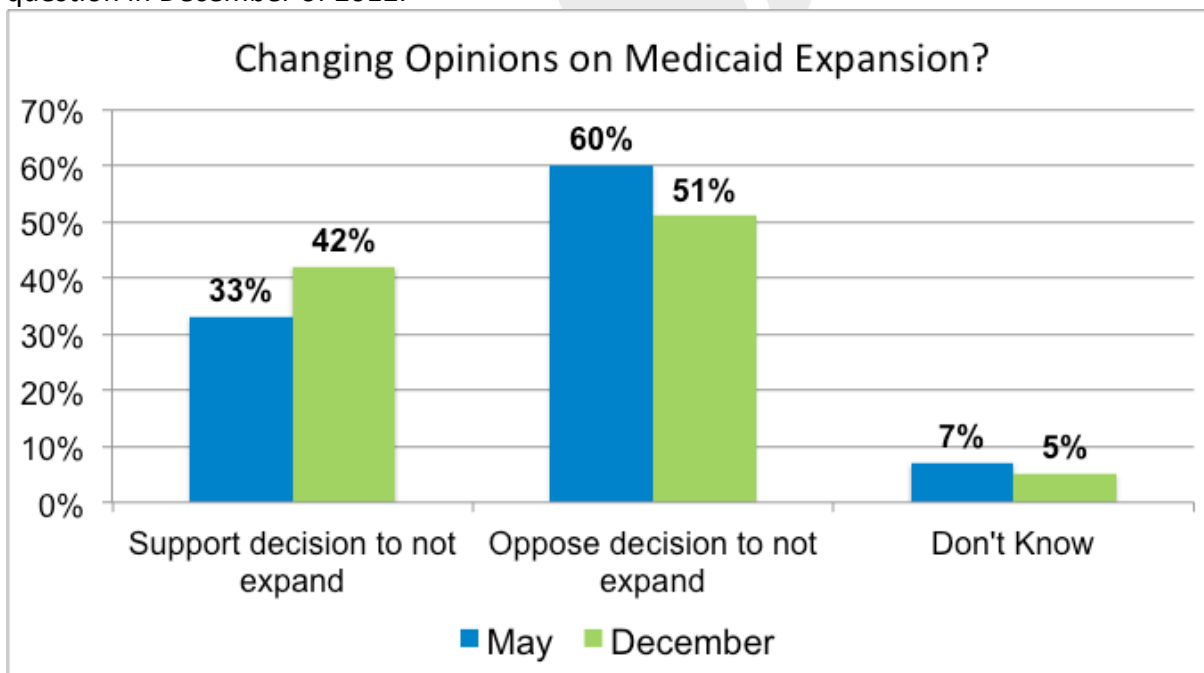
**Implementing the Affordable Care Act (Obamacare):**

We asked several questions about the Affordable Care Act and its implementation in Tennessee. We first asked Tennesseans about what they thought about the Affordable Care Act overall two different ways to determine how much public opinion depends on whether it is referred to as “Obamacare.” The effects are dramatic – 52% say they disapprove of the law when it is linked to the President, but only 27% disapprove when it is called the Affordable Care Act. While support for the law is low in either case (15% and 17% respectively), a substantial percentage indicate that they “haven’t heard enough about it.”

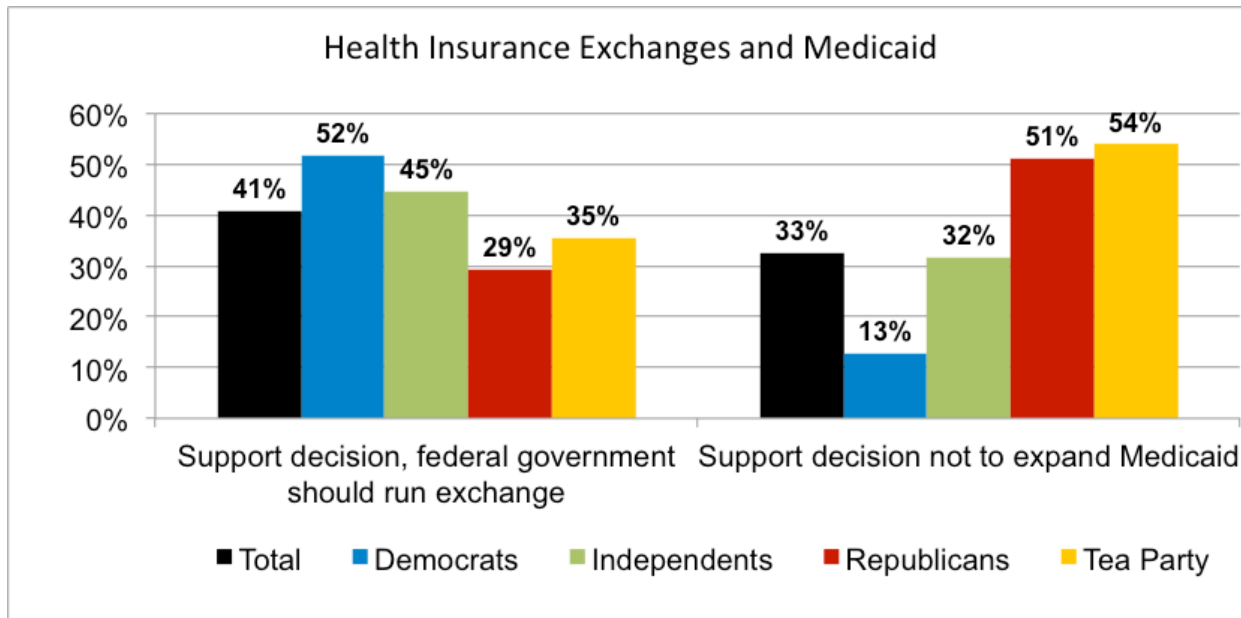
One aspect of the new law is the ability of states to either set up their own health care exchange system or let the federal government run the exchange, A slight plurality of registered Tennessee voters would prefer that the state run the exchange (46% to 41% preferring the federal government). Relative to opinion in December, Tennesseans are slightly more supportive of a federally run health exchange program than they were six months ago when the issue was just beginning to be discussed.



Another important question is whether the state should accept federal support to expand Medicaid to cover low-income individuals who currently lack health insurance. Six months ago, 51% of registered voters supported expanding Medicaid to cover low-income individuals. When the May poll was conducted, 60% of the registered voters indicated that they opposed the recent decision to not expand Medicaid at this time – an increase of 9 percentage points. Presumably the shift indicates the effect of the recent debates and discussions – the issue of Medicaid expansion had yet to be widely discussed when we initially asked the question in December of 2012.



There are important partisan splits in both of these opinions. Breaking opinion on health care exchange down by party reveals that Republicans are the least enthusiastic about having the federal government run the exchange (29%) and Independents and Democrats are more supportive of having the federal government run the health care exchanges (45% and 52% respectively). Opinions on Medicaid expansion continue to vary dramatically by party – an overwhelming majority of Independents and Democrats support extending Medicaid to cover low-income individuals, but Republicans and members of the Tea Party are nearly evenly split on the extension.

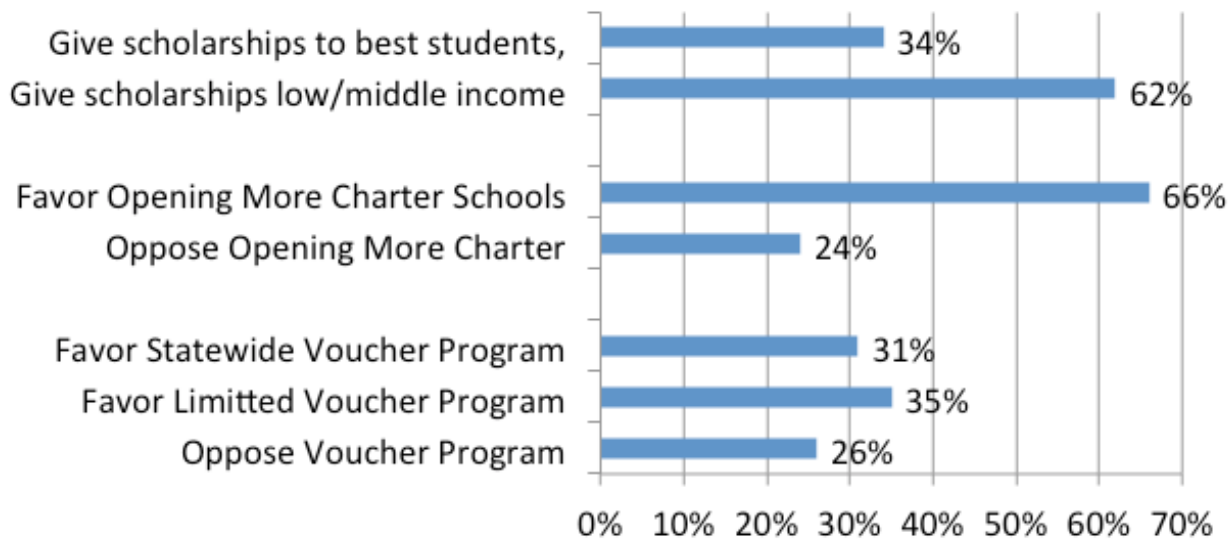


### **Education Policy in Tennessee:**

We asked several questions about issues related to education policy in Tennessee. Support for charter schools remains strong, with 66% supporting charter schools. Support for vouchers is more divided. The largest support – 35% -- is for “a limited voucher program for low-income families in poor performance schools.” 31% favor a voucher program without such restrictions and 26% oppose school vouchers altogether.

Another issue relates to higher-education scholarships funded by the Tennessee lottery. A sizable majority thinks these scholarships should be given to “students from low-income and middle-income families who maintain a certain GPA.” Only 34% think that the scholarships should be given “to very best students regardless of need.” Perhaps not surprisingly, differences of opinion for education scholarships depend most on income. Upper-income individuals are most supportive of the current practice, and those making less than \$75,000 are substantially more interested in restricting the scholarship based on financial need.

## Education Issues in Tennessee

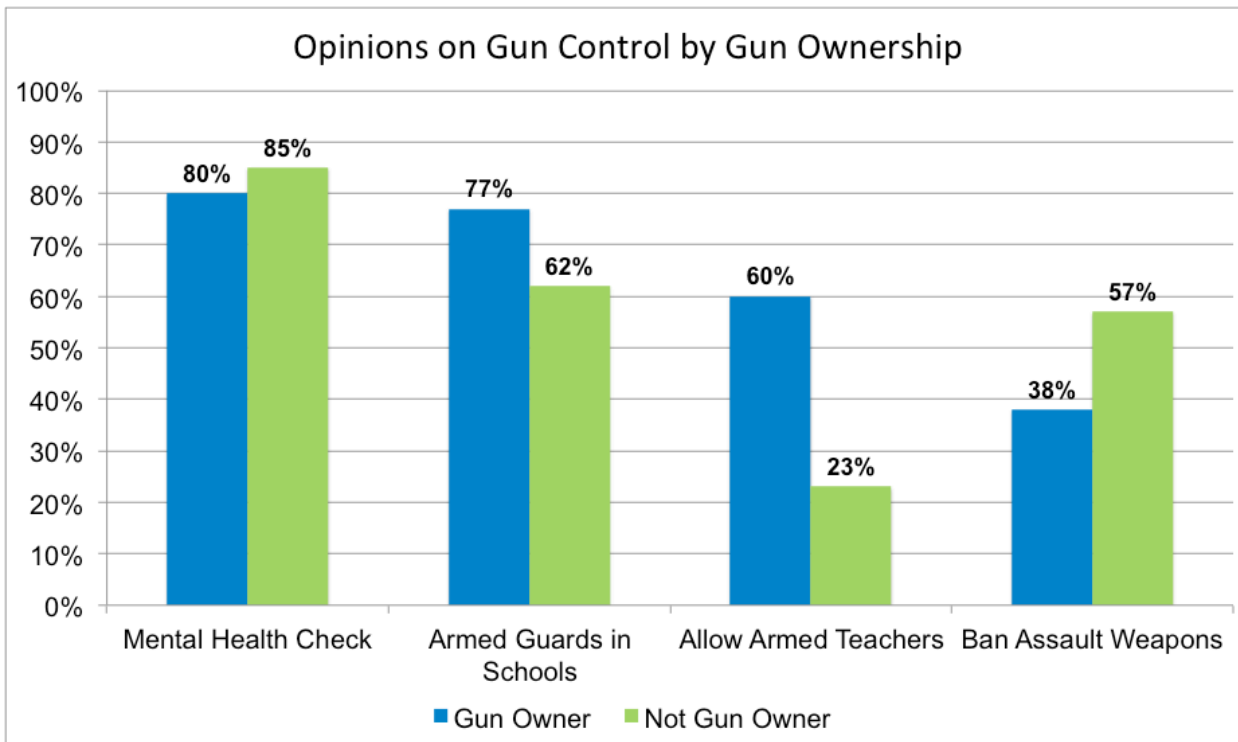


## Gun Policy in Tennessee:

We asked a battery of questions about guns. For starters, we sought to see whether Tennesseans supported the recent law passed by the state legislature and signed by the Governor that required employers to allow employees to keep a gun in their car, if they had the required permits. It is clear this law meets with the public's approval. Nearly 70% of Tennesseans support the law. Even among those who do not own guns, a bare majority favored this law.

We also asked a set of questions on various efforts the US Congress has been considering to possibly reduce gun violence. In general, Tennesseans strongly favor background checks. Over 80% of the public supports mental health checks on all potential gun buyers, and nearly 90% advocate criminal background checks. By contrast, only 45% support banning assault weapons. Interestingly, 71% of Tennesseans favor putting armed guards in schools and 46% think allowing teachers to carry guns on school property is a good idea.

We asked near the end of the survey whether the respondent owned a gun (59% of registered voters indicated that they did). The differences between self-reported gun owners and non-owners are as expected—those owning guns are more “pro-gun,” but there was one difference worth noting. The idea of allowing teachers to carry guns at school was highly divisive -- 60% favored the idea among gun owners, but only 23% of those who do not own guns favor this policy. This is a big difference and it shows how the reactions to this proposed reform is shaped by gun ownership—much more so than any of the other proposed reforms.

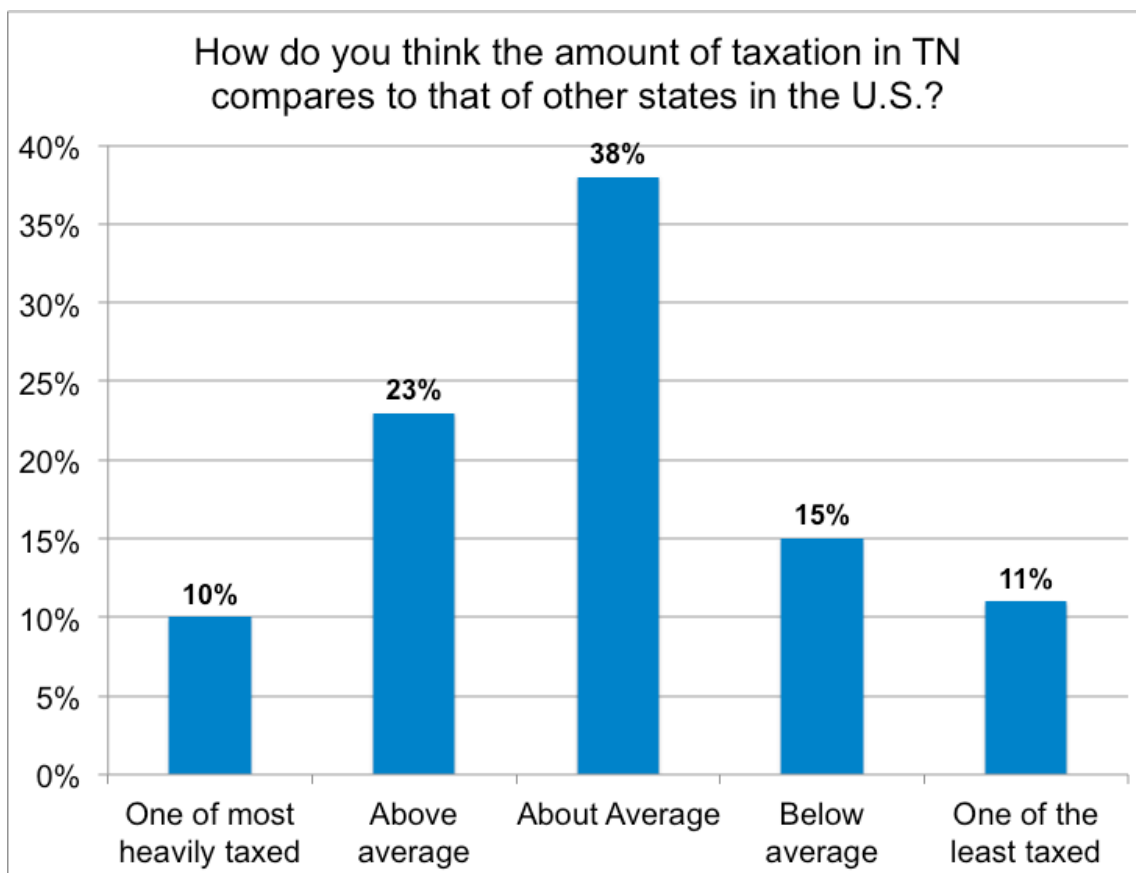


## Other Issues Facing the State

Tennesseans have a long history of opposing taxes, as shown during the debate over a possible income tax nearly a decade and half ago. That predisposition arises again over the current debate over collecting sales tax on sales through the internet. Over 55% of Tennesseans think enforcement of that tax is a bad idea and only 38% think it is a good policy. However, if you ask whether not collecting the tax is fair or unfair to local businesses, the public is split: 47% say it is fair to 47% say it is unfair.

To provide some perspective on taxes, we asked registered voters in Tennessee to rate the amount of taxation in TN relative to the other 50 states. The fact is we are one of the least taxed states in the country. Only 26% of Tennesseans thought the amount of taxes in the state were below average or “one of the least taxed states.” One third of the public felt the tax rate was heavy or above average. Nearly 40% thought we were about average. It is clear that Tennesseans feel overtaxed. But it is also clear that they do not fully appreciate how our taxes compare to other Americans.





The public continues to show a strong preference for their voice to be heard in key decision making as opposed to members of the state government. In particular, a stunning 93% of Tennesseans believe the public should choose nominees for the U.S. Senate, not the State Legislature. The voters also believe they should choose judges (49%) and not the Governor (25%). The results on the selection of judges are very much in line with an earlier Vanderbilt Poll results.

Two years ago, we asked about wine in grocery stores and we found strong support for changing the current state law. The same results arise in our May 2013 poll -- nearly 70% of Tennesseans favor a change. This is true even if you point out that it could hurt small businesses; 61% remain in support of wine in grocery stores.

We also asked Tennesseans about the effects of sequestration and whether they thought the automatic spending cuts would be good for the country, bad for the country, or have no real impact. Just above 50% thought the cuts were bad for the country, 21% thought there were good for the country and 20% thought they would have no real impact.

The final topic we will address is gay rights. When asked whether there should or should not be health insurance and other employee benefits for gay and lesbian domestic partners, 62% supported employee benefits. We also asked the public's thinking about the legal standing of same sex couples. The public was divided, with 32% favoring gay marriage, 17% favoring civil unions, and 46% favoring no legal recognition. That means, overall, Tennesseans slightly support some sort of legal recognition.