



# THE TENNESSEE POLL

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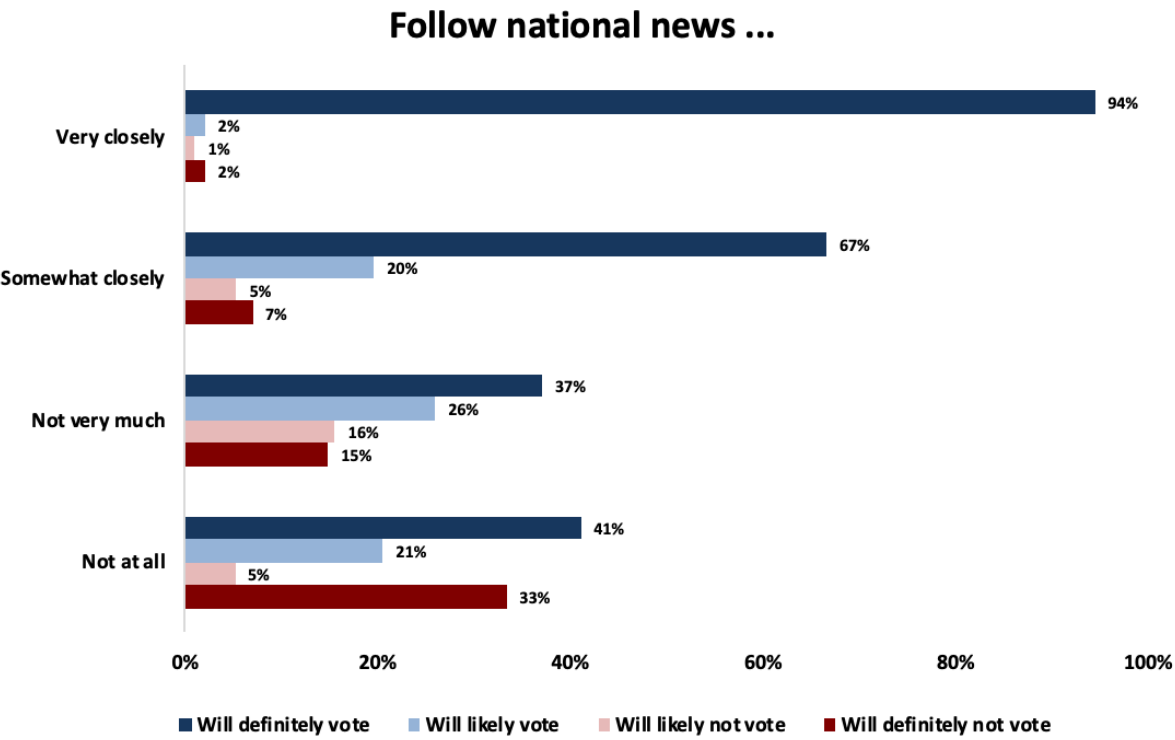
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## **TENNESSEANS FAVOR REPUBLICAN CANDIDATES BUT ARE DIVIDED ON THE PARTISAN QUESTION OF VOTING BY MAIL**

JOHNSON CITY (May 19, 2020) –The Tennessee Poll, conducted late last month by the Applied Social Research Lab at East Tennessee State University, sought to take a snapshot of the state’s potential voters in advance of the 2020 general election. At this time, it is impossible to predict who will vote in November, but 52.8% of the eligible voting population in Tennessee cast a ballot in 2016, so turnout could be similar in 2020. The Tennessee Poll asked respondents how likely they are to vote in November 2020, and 83% said that they definitely will vote (67%) or will likely vote (16%). For the purposes of discussing the elections, the 17% who said they would definitely not vote (9%), likely would not vote (6%) or were not sure (2%) were omitted from questions about voting in 2020.

There is a strong relationship between how closely one follows the news and the likelihood of voting. One third of those who don’t follow national news at all say that they definitely will not vote in the November general election. Figure 1 illustrates the relationship.

**Figure 1. Relationship between attention to national news and likelihood to vote**



TN Poll #5 PR 2.

Graph By: ETSU ASRL

Tennesseans are more likely to closely follow national news than state news. Seventy-two percent of Tennessee adults follow national news either very closely (32%) or somewhat closely (40%), whereas only 62% follow state news either very closely (19%) or somewhat closely (43%). Interest in both national and state news increases with age, with 48% of those aged 55 and older following national news “very closely” in contrast to 18% of those 18 to 34 years old.

For a plurality of respondents (37%), local papers and/or local television stations are among their primary sources of news. The second most common primary news source is Fox News (31 percent), followed by national network news (24 percent), national public radio or television (15 percent), and CNN (14 percent). While 48 percent of respondents cited only one primary source of news, 49% cited more than one primary source. On average, respondents cited 1.8 sources, and no source is more likely than another to be a sole source of news.

**Voting Preferences**

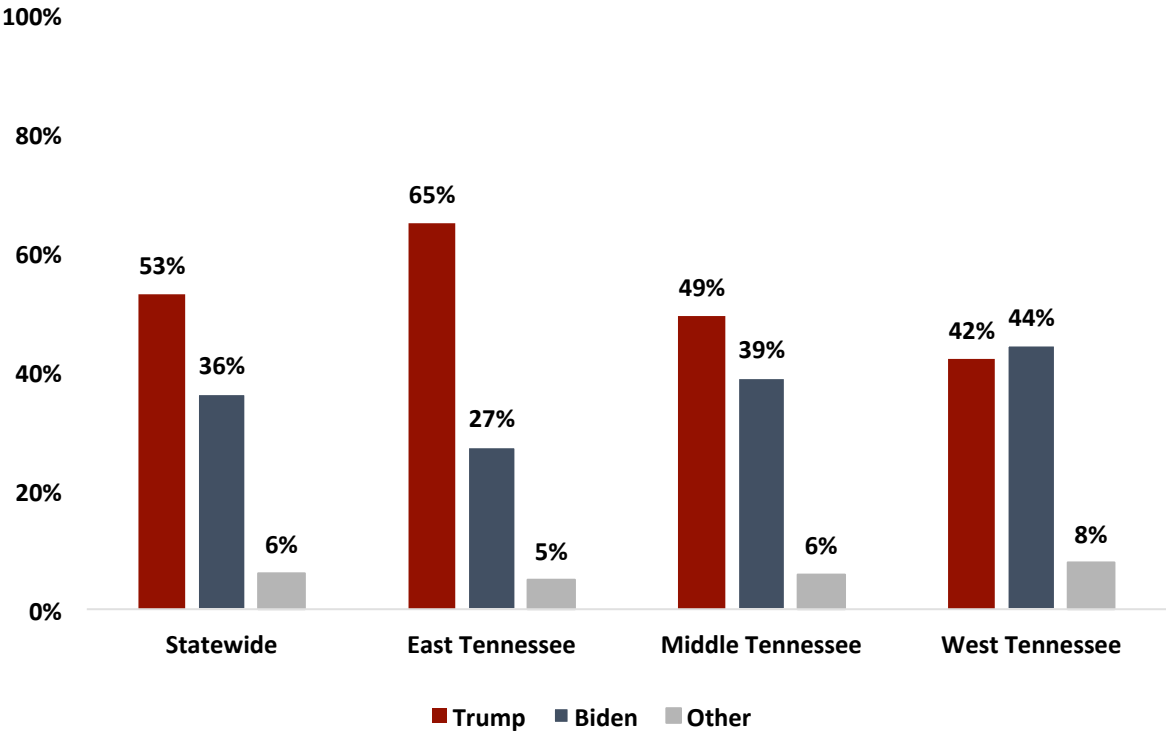
A snapshot of Tennesseans who expressed some likelihood of voting (n=536) favors President Donald Trump (53%) to Joe Biden (36%) in the November 2020 presidential contest. Among Republicans, 94% support the President’s re-election, whereas only 4% of Democrats say they would vote for Mr. Trump. The story for Independents, however, is much more complicated; Independents favor Trump over Biden by a 10-percentage point margin (37% to 27%), but 22% of Independents say they will vote for another candidate, and 14% remain uncertain. In 2016,

For more information about this study or about the Applied Social Research Lab (ASRL) at East Tennessee State University, please visit us on the web at [www.etsu.edu/asrl](http://www.etsu.edu/asrl). You may also contact the director of ASRL, Dr. Kelly N. Foster, at [fosterkn@etsu.edu](mailto:fosterkn@etsu.edu) or by phone 423-439-4374.

Trump took all but three counties in Tennessee, winning overall with 60.7% of the state’s popular vote, to 34.7% for his Democratic opponent Hillary Clinton. These new data suggest that there has been little to no change in electoral support for Donald Trump in the Volunteer State.

Support for President Trump is greatest in East Tennessee where 65% of respondents said they would vote for Trump if the election were held that day, as opposed to only 27% who said they would vote for Biden—a margin of 38 percentage points. In Middle Tennessee, Trump’s margin over Biden is 10 percentage points (49% and 39% respectively), and in West Tennessee, Biden leads by a mere two percentage points, a statistical tie.

**Figure 2. Presidential Preference, by region of the state**



TN Poll #5 PR 2.

Graph By: ETSU ASRL

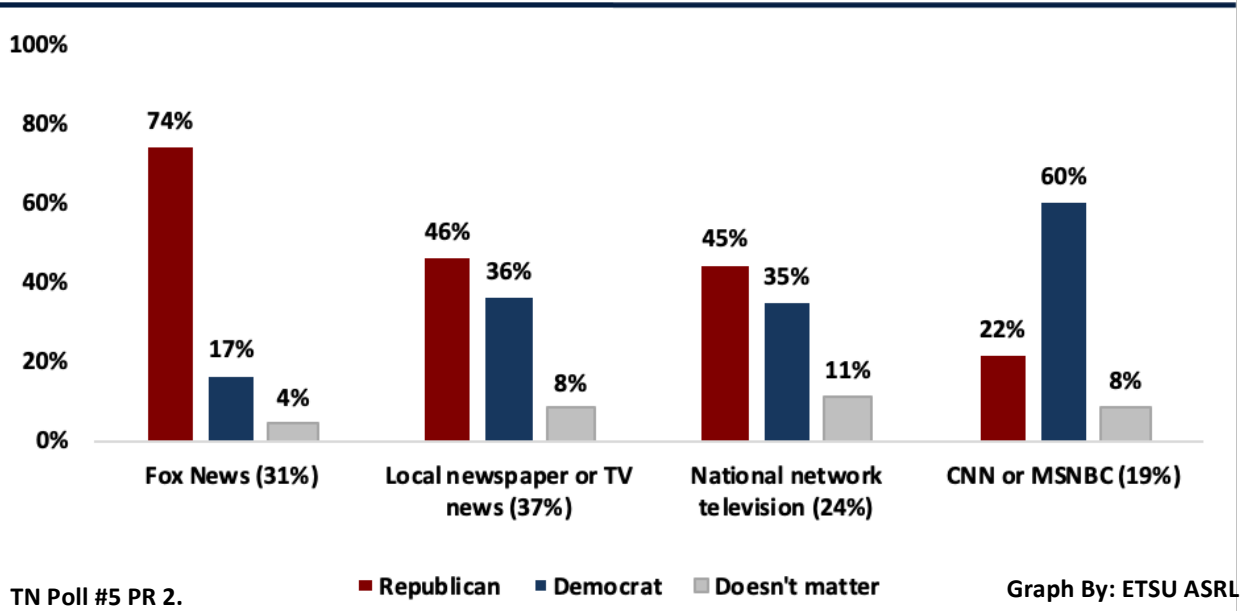
A plurality (43%) of Tennesseans who said they were likely to vote want to replace retiring U.S. Sen. Lamar Alexander with another Republican; 26% prefer a Democratic candidate and another 26% say the party of Alexander’s successor does not matter. Not surprisingly, a vast majority of Republicans want to keep the Senate seat in the Republican camp; it should be noted that the support for keeping the Senate seat Republican is lower than support for re-electing the President among Republicans, and the support for a Democrat to take the Senate seat among Democrats (71%) is considerably lower than their support for Biden’s candidacy. The importance of holding the Senate seat among Republicans and taking it for a Democratic

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candidate among Democrats increases with levels of education; those with college degrees are more likely to think that party control of the Senate seat matters.

On the generic ballot for House races, Tennessee adults who are likeliest to vote favor Republican candidates to Democratic candidates by a 13-percentage-point margin. The margin of difference is greatest among those aged 35 to 54 (a 25-point margin) and smallest among 18- to 34-year-olds (a 9-point margin favoring Republican candidates). Of those who get their news from Fox News, 74% say they will vote Republican in their House contest in November, as opposed to 17% who say they will vote Democrat. Those getting their news from local television and newspapers or from national networks (ABC, CBC, or NBC) are also more likely to support the Republican candidate, although by a much smaller margin (see Figure 3). The viewers of CNN and/or MSNBC, on the other hand, are much more likely to vote for the Democratic candidate.

**Figure 3. Generic House election preference, by primary news source**



Although statewide, 48% of Tennessee adults favor the Republican candidate for the House, compared to 35% that favor the Democrat, there are some dramatic regional differences. In West Tennessee, respondents favor Democratic candidates for the house (45 percent) to Republican opponents (41%) by a small margin. Middle Tennessee adults favor Republican House candidates (41 percent) to Democrats (37%) by an equally small margin. In East Tennessee, on the other hand, 61% of respondents said they would vote for the Republican House candidate, while only 26% said they would vote Democrat.

## Voting by Mail

Given the complexities from the COVID-19 pandemic, some have proposed that the 2020 general election this coming November be conducted by mail. President Trump has come out strongly against voting by mail, and the debate has taken on a partisan tone. A recent Gallup Poll found 64% of American adults favor “allowing all voters to vote by mail or absentee ballot in this year’s presidential election,” and 34% opposed.<sup>1</sup> Tennesseans are much more divided on the issue.

In general, Tennessee adults are more likely to oppose voting by mail as an option. The recent Tennessee Poll split its sample into two randomly assigned groups who received two different questions related to voting by mail:

*Group One: “Do you favor or oppose requiring voting by mail in the 2020 general election?”*

*Group Two: “Do you think every Tennessean should have the option of voting by mail in the next general election, or should vote-by-mail options only be given to those who are physically unable to vote in person?”*

The question put to Group One used the term “requiring,” making it clear that voting in-person was not an option. The question for Group Two presented the controversy as an option for voters to make a choice. Despite the differences in question wording, there is no statistical difference between the two groups in levels of support for voting by mail. This suggests that opinions on the issue of voting by mail are fairly well-fixed since variance in question wording has no impact.

Tennesseans are closely divided on the question of voting by mail, but there are major partisan differences. The majority of Republicans oppose voting by mail while the majority of Democrats support it. Independents, however, while more likely to support the option, are more influenced by the question wording than are partisans, as illustrated in Table 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Younis, Mohamed. “Most Americans Favor Voting by Mail as Option in November.” Gallup Poll, May 12, 2020. Accessed online on May 12, 2020, at <https://news.gallup.com/poll/310586/americans-favor-voting-mail-option->

**Table 1. Support and opposition to voting by mail, by party and question wording**

	Statewide	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Favor requiring vote-by-mail (Group One)	43%	29%	40%	63%
Favor option to vote-by-mail (Group Two)	44%	26%	46%	69%
<b>Total in favor</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>66%</b>
	Statewide	Republican	Independent	Democrat
Oppose requiring vote-by-mail (Group One)	44%	61%	26%	33%
Oppose vote-by-mail option for those able to vote in person (Group Two)	48%	67%	43%	26%
<b>Total opposed</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>30%</b>

TN Poll #5 PR 2.

Table By: ETSU ASRL

Currently, to vote by mail in Tennessee, a voter must qualify for an absentee ballot. The requirements are that one will be away at the time of election or is disabled and not able to go to the polling place. The list of requirements is on the Tennessee Secretary of State’s web site.<sup>2</sup>

**About the Tennessee Poll**

The Tennessee Poll is conducted by the Applied Social Research Lab (ASRL) in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at East Tennessee State University. ASRL is directed by Dr. Kelly N. Foster, associate professor of sociology.

The Tennessee Poll is an annual public opinion poll funded by East Tennessee State University. The mission of The Tennessee Poll is to provide the citizens and governance of Tennessee with neutral, unbiased information on Tennesseans’ perceptions of issues that impact their health, education, and quality of life.

Though the project has been internally funded to date, there exists the possibility of outside researchers or organizations being given the option to purchase space for questions on future polls. Should this occur, any and all funding sources will be noted in the methodology report for that particular poll.

The Applied Social Research Lab is a member of the Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations (AASRO) and adheres to the reporting requirements of the American Association for Public Opinion Research Transparency Initiative standards in research reporting.

<sup>2</sup> Requirements for absentee voting by mail in Tennessee: <https://sos.tn.gov/products/elections/absentee-voting#1>

For detailed information on The Tennessee Poll, including methodology and additional analysis, please visit [www.etsu.edu/asrl/tnpoll](http://www.etsu.edu/asrl/tnpoll).

## Survey Methodology

The Tennessee Poll uses random digit dialing (RDD) to ensure that all Tennesseans are represented. Phone numbers were drawn from a dual frame RDD sample of cell phone and landline numbers. Braun Research Inc. acquired the cell phone sample and completed the telephone interviews. It is important to note that this particular Tennessee Poll (poll #5) was fielded during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. Though ASRL maintains an active computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) lab for research purposes that utilizes ETSU student callers, the phone lab was closed due to state regulations during this time. Braun Research Inc. had capabilities and were utilizing secure remote calling with their phone interviewers during this time so in addition to acquiring the sample, they also completed the interviews.

The final sample includes a total of 618 completed interviews, 188 completed by landline (30.4% percent) and 430 completed by cell phone (69.6% percent). The final data are weighted by age, education, gender, and race to adjust for differential response rates in order to assure that the data are as closely representative of the state's actual adult population as possible. The margin of error for a sample of 618 is +/- 3.9 percentage points at the 95% confidence level for the entire sample. Any subpopulation analysis entails a greater margin of error. For detailed methodology on The Tennessee Poll as well as margin of error reports and additional analysis, please go to [www.etsu.edu/asrl/tnpoll](http://www.etsu.edu/asrl/tnpoll).

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