

1998

## Trends in Public Opinion, 1989-1996

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### eCommons Citation

Scheb, John M. II; Lyons, William; and Neeley, Grant W., "Trends in Public Opinion, 1989-1996" (1998). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. Paper 77.

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## Trends in Public Opinion, 1989–1996

—*John M. Scheb II, William Lyons, and Grant W. Neeley*

He who writes of the state, of law, or of politics without first coming to close quarters with public opinion is simply evading the very central structure of his study.

—Arthur Bentley, *The Process of Government* (1903)

### INTRODUCTION

“Public opinion” consists of the measurable values, beliefs, attitudes, and opinions of the mass public. Nearly all political scientists, following Arthur Bentley, recognize the importance of public opinion in politics and the policy process.<sup>1</sup> While it is true that much of the stuff of public opinion is unstable or even ephemeral, some elements of public opinion not only endure but also reveal political preferences and behavior. Certainly, party identification and ideological self-identification are examples of reasonably stable attitudes that are linked both to issue positions and to candidate evaluation.<sup>2</sup> Party identification has long been recognized as the main long-term force underlying voters’ positions on policy issues and ultimately influencing their decisions in the voting booth. Ideological self-identification, while somewhat more changeable than party identification, is also a relatively stable, enduring political force that is likewise linked to issue positions and voting behavior.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we examine the party identifications and ideological orientations of Tennesseans from 1989 through 1996, as revealed through survey research. We also look at Tennesseans’ positions on several issues of public policy that have been salient in state politics during this period. Our intent is to isolate any trends in the partisan and ideological character of the state while examining citizens’ positions on key issues.

The data upon which this chapter is based are derived from the Tennessee Poll, a statewide survey of adults conducted periodically by the Social Science Research Institute (SSRI) at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The first Tennessee Poll was taken in April 1989; we have used surveys conducted through October 1996. During these eight years, SSRI conducted fifteen installments of the Tennessee Poll, from one to three polls per year, depending on the frequency

of important or controversial issues. In every instance, respondents were interviewed by telephone and selected by random-digit dialing. Sample sizes varied slightly, but with the exception of the 1994 survey ( $n=694$ ) and the Fall 1996 survey ( $n=665$ ), the sample size exceeded 800 respondents.<sup>4</sup> In all editions of the Tennessee Poll, the demographics were such that we can be confident that the samples are representative of the adult population of the State.

Over the years the Tennessee Poll has attempted to gauge public opinion on a variety of issues, ranging from people's perceptions of Elvis Presley after his death to their predictions of the outcome of the annual Tennessee-Alabama football game. Many social issues of a more serious nature have been addressed as well, including drug use, teen pregnancy, AIDS, use of the Internet, violence, and pornography. The Tennessee Poll has also assessed public opinion on a fairly large number of public policy issues, including questions involving criminal justice, health care policy, education, and welfare programs. Unfortunately, most of these questions were asked in only one or two polls, reflecting the constantly changing public dialog in the state and national media.

Here we focus on five variables for which we have data over the entire time period: the matters of party identification, ideological self-identification, the state lottery, the state income tax, and abortion. The exact questions taken from the Tennessee Poll are contained in the appendix. Our selection of these questions is not dictated by convenience alone. As suggested above, partisanship and ideology are fundamental to any analysis of public opinion. The lottery, income tax, and abortion issues have been particularly salient in Tennessee politics over the last several years. While far from a complete mapping of the opinion landscape of the state, these data do provide a good sense of the opinion climate. To simplify the presentation as well as smooth out fluctuations due to sampling error, we have averaged the data by year. Thus we will be discussing eight points in time—each of the years from 1989 through 1996.

### TRENDS IN PARTISANSHIP

In his 1949 classic *Southern Politics*, V. O. Key remarked that “the forces of history . . . may have destined Republicans to a minority position” in Tennessee politics.<sup>5</sup> While that may have been true for many years after Key made his observation, the level of party competition in Tennessee has increased significantly over the last three decades. Until the early 1960s, Tennessee was a one party state in the tradition of the post-Civil War South. East Tennessee remained solidly Republican while the rest of the state was part of the “solid South” that delivered consistent Democratic victories statewide. This changed in the early sixties with the growth of a less traditional, more ideologically conservative Republican Party in the middle and western parts of the state.

As the national Democratic Party moved to a more liberal position on social issues, especially civil rights, a grassroots conservatism developed in the South and elsewhere. This surge of conservatism helped the Republicans make a strong

comeback in the once "solid South." In Tennessee, this new life for the Republicans led to the election of two senators, Howard Baker and Bill Brock, as well as to the first Republican Tennessee governor of the century, Winfield Dunn of Memphis. While the newly rejuvenated Republican Party has greatly invigorated political competition within the state, it has never matched the Democrats in organization or levels of mass voter identification. The East has remained the stronghold of the party, but that strength has not shown the ideological fervor that motivated many of the newer converts. Republicans in East Tennessee follow a tradition of Republicanism dating back to the Civil War. The new Republicans in the Middle and West were more likely to have had Democratic family roots and to find their partisanship grounded in ideological conservatism rather than in family or community tradition.

The two facets of Tennessee Republicanism were very evident in the 1976 Republican presidential primary. Gerald Ford came from the moderate wing of the party. After succeeding Richard Nixon in 1974, he sought the nomination on his own. He was challenged by California Gov. Ronald Reagan, who was the candidate of the more conservative wing of the party. In the Republican primary, Reagan carried Middle and West Tennessee, while Ford won easily in the East. Tennessee had one Republican party, albeit one with a dual personality, but the G.O.P. was finally a force in Tennessee politics.

During the 1980s, the Tennessee G.O.P. enjoyed some statewide success, most notably the election and reelection of Lamar Alexander as governor. Still, the Democrats won both U.S. Senate seats (Gore and Sasser) and continued to dominate the state legislature. However, the 1990s witnessed a dramatic upswing in the Republicans' electoral fortunes. By the end of 1994 the state once again had two Republican senators and a Republican governor. Moreover the Republicans also controlled the state Senate, leaving only the House of Representatives and the soon to be abolished Public Service Commission controlled by the once dominant Democrats. Those developments, however, do not make certain the beginning of a new era of Republican dominance of state politics in Tennessee. In the 1996 elections, the partisan makeup of the U.S. House and Senate delegations remained unchanged, although Democrats won back control of the state Senate.

The Tennessee Poll data on party identification suggest, at least in the near term, close competition and fairly regular swings in power between the parties. In 1981, UT-Chattanooga political scientist Robert Swansborough found that 25 percent of Tennesseans identified with the Republican Party, although he noted that this level was substantially higher than in the South generally.<sup>6</sup> Our data, which reflect the last eight years, indicate that Tennessee now possesses a very competitive partisan environment.<sup>7</sup> On average, over the eight-year period, 30 percent of those surveyed identified themselves as Republicans, as compared with 32 percent as Democrats and 38 percent as independents (see table 1). This level of Republican identification represents a significant increase over the 25 percent level found by Swansborough in 1981, although it is still a long way from

Table 11.1

TRENDS IN TENNESSEE PUBLIC OPINION, 1989-1996									
	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	Avg.
<b>Party Identification</b>									
Democrat	31%	32%	30%	31%	34%	35%	33%	31%	32%
Independent	40%	41%	43%	39%	38%	33%	33%	36%	38%
Republican	30%	27%	27%	30%	28%	32%	34%	33%	30%
<b>Ideology</b>									
Liberal	15%	14%	17%	15%	12%	17%	17%	17%	16%
Moderate	54%	51%	51%	50%	45%	38%	45%	43%	47%
Conservative	31%	35%	32%	35%	43%	45%	38%	40%	37%
<b>State Lottery</b>									
Favor	60%	62%	70%	70%	72%	71%	67%	68%	68%
Not Sure	6%	6%	6%	8%	4%	6%	6%	7%	6%
Oppose	34%	32%	24%	22%	24%	23%	27%	25%	26%
<b>State Income Tax</b>									
Favor	30%	30%	34%	32%	31%	26%	31%	24%	30%
Not Sure	11%	12%	10%	10%	8%	15%	10%	11%	11%
Oppose	59%	58%	56%	58%	61%	59%	59%	65%	59%
<b>Abortion Law</b>									
Easier	5%	7%	9%	7%	10%	n/d	8%	5%	7%
About Right	49%	50%	47%	49%	43%	n/d	46%	50%	48%
Harder	46%	43%	44%	44%	47%	n/d	46%	45%	45%

*Note: Data derived from the Tennessee Poll conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1989-1996.*

a majority. The independents, who number in the plurality, will dictate which party controls government. Thus, divided party government at the state level remains highly likely.

In terms of mass party identification, Tennessee is reasonably consistent with the national picture. Using data collected by the General Social Survey and the National Election Study (see table 2), we estimate that over the 1989-1994 period, 30 percent of Americans identified as Republicans, 37 percent with the Democrats, and 33 percent as independents. Tennessee is therefore indistinguishable from the national environment with respect to the proportion of Republican identifiers. It differs slightly in that Tennesseans are a bit less likely to identify as Democrats and a bit more likely to identify as independents.

Obviously, the elections of Republican Don Sundquist to the governorship and two Republicans, Bill Frist and Fred Thompson, to the U.S. Senate in 1994 (as well as Thompson's re-election in 1996) demonstrate the viability of Republicanism in Tennessee. The resurgence of the Republican Party is certainly not unique to Tennessee, as indicated by the Republican takeover of Congress in 1994. Indeed, the shifting party loyalties of Tennesseans parallel what is happening throughout the South, as whites defect en masse from the Democratic Party. This development is obviously related to race, but it is also related to ideology. In Tennessee, as throughout the South, many whites are apt to eschew a

Table 11.2

## NATIONAL TRENDS IN PARTISANSHIP AND IDEOLOGY, 1989-1996

	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	Avg.
<b>Party Identification</b>									
Democrat	38%	36%	36%	36%	35%	37%	*	42%	37%
Independent	29%	32%	33%	39%	35%	35%	*	28%	33%
Republican	33%	32%	31%	25%	30%	29%	*	30%	30%
<b>Ideology</b>									
Liberal	28%	27%	28%	28%	27%	24%	*	26%	27%
Moderate	39%	36%	40%	31%	37%	36%	*	30%	36%
Conservative	33%	37%	32%	41%	36%	37%	*	44%	37%

*Note: These data are derived from the General Social Survey, except for 1992 and 1996, which are based on the National Election Studies conducted by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan. The NES data appear to overstate somewhat the proportion of conservatives and understate the proportion of Republicans. This is, no doubt, due to slight differences in instrumentation between the GSS and the NES. Still, the average for the eight-year period provides a reasonable estimate of these parameters during this time-frame.*

Democratic Party that they perceive to be too liberal. Indeed, in our aggregated 1989-1996 data, 63 percent of black respondents but only 28 percent of white respondents identified themselves as Democrats (see table 5). Our additional research found that as a group, these white Democrats tend to be less well educated, less affluent, older citizens than whites identifying themselves as Republicans or independents. They are also much more likely to be comfortable with the "liberal" label, which brings us to the next topic—ideology.

## TRENDS IN IDEOLOGICAL SELF-IDENTIFICATION

While there are a number of ways to conceptualize ideological variation, the standard device is the liberal-conservative continuum that ranges from "very liberal" or "extremely liberal" on the "far left" to "very conservative" or "extremely conservative" on the "far right."<sup>8</sup> Viewing the liberal-conservative continuum more simply as a trichotomy (i.e., "liberal", "moderate" and "conservative"), our data show that the proportion of liberals in Tennessee has remained fairly stable (and small) over the eight year period (see table 1).<sup>9</sup> On average, only 16 percent of Tennesseans prefer the liberal moniker. This stands in sharp contrast to our national estimate in which 28 percent of Americans are identified as liberals for the entire time-frame. Our data suggest that, as with Democratic identifiers, liberals in Tennessee tend to be less educated and less well-off than other citizens. Interestingly, our data suggest that while blacks are much more likely than whites to call themselves Democrats (63 percent to 28 percent), they are only marginally more likely than whites to self-identify as liberals (23 percent to 14 percent).

The proportion of self-identified conservatives increased substantially throughout the eight-year period. Whereas in 1989 about 31 percent identified as conservatives, in 1994 the number grew dramatically to 45 percent. It then decreased significantly in 1995 to 38 percent, perhaps as a reaction to perceived

excesses of the national Republican agenda. In 1996, the proportion of conservatives bounced back to 40 percent. The average for the entire period is 37 percent, which is remarkably close to the national norm (see tables 1 and 2).

The percentage of Tennesseans identifying themselves as moderates dropped significantly from 54 percent in 1989 to 38 percent in 1994. Of course, in that year, Tennesseans gave the Republicans huge electoral victories that helped the GOP take control of Congress. In 1995, Tennesseans appeared to pull back to the center. The proportion of moderates jumped from 38 percent to 45 percent. The proportion of conservatives dropped from 45 percent to 38 percent (the proportion of liberals remained constant at 17 percent). The 1996 data do not reveal statistically significant differences in ideology and partisanship from 1995.

Averaging the data over time makes clear that Tennesseans are more likely than Americans generally to self-define as moderates (compare tables 1 and 2). They are just about as likely as Americans generally to identify themselves as conservatives. But Tennesseans are considerably less likely to adopt the liberal label. Viewing the liberal-moderate-conservative trichotomy as an interval measure, one can clearly say that the central tendency of Tennesseans falls somewhat to the right of Americans generally. It would be fair to characterize the Tennessee political environment as moderately conservative. This label is consistent with the observation that most, if not all, successful statewide Republican candidates, including Lamar Alexander, Don Sundquist, Fred Thompson, and Bill Frist, have avoided making obvious appeals to the far right in their campaigns.

### THE STATE LOTTERY ISSUE

In the late 1980s, Tennesseans became interested in the possibility of establishing a state lottery to supplement or replace other sources of state revenue. As adjoining states like Georgia, Kentucky, and Virginia adopted lotteries, concern mounted that Tennessee was losing sales tax revenue as consumers near the borders crossed state lines to buy gasoline and groceries at stores where they could also purchase lottery tickets. Since 1989, the Tennessee Poll has included the following question: "Some have suggested a state lottery for Tennessee. How do you feel? Would you favor or oppose instituting a lottery in Tennessee?" The Tennessee Poll has consistently found high levels of public support for the lottery. On average over the eight-year period, about two-thirds of respondents have indicated support for the concept; about one-quarter have expressed opposition. Opposition to the lottery is most intense among strong conservatives, the elderly, people who live in rural/farming areas, fundamentalist Protestants, and, interestingly, those with the highest levels of education.

Despite strong public backing, there has been little movement in the General Assembly to enact a lottery for Tennessee. Many no doubt wonder how the status quo can remain intact in the face of this much support for a change in pol-

icy. Most people are probably unaware that the state Constitution prohibits lotteries and that changing it is extremely difficult. However, in the 1994 legislative session a call for a state constitutional convention was almost approved. The major stumbling block came in the state Senate, where a number of senators based their opposition on their personal values. Most of these senators are unlikely to change their views, regardless of the degree of support for the lottery among their constituents. This reflects the traditional political culture still apparent in Tennessee. The fact that the citizenry tolerates a few senators' ability to prevent a procedure to consider a policy favored by the majority underlines the deference to authority that is part of such a culture.

### THE STATE INCOME TAX

In their seminal textbook *Government in Tennessee*, Greene, Grubbs, and Hobday remarked that "if controversies are lacking, a fight can always be stirred up on taxes."<sup>10</sup> A long-standing question in this state has been whether to institute a personal income tax. Greene, et al. thought that "the insatiable demand for governmental expenditure" might lead to the adoption of such a tax, although they admitted that "by all signs it is unwelcome at present."<sup>11</sup> Tennessee relies primarily on a very high sales tax to generate revenue. This system is often criticized as regressive and unstable. At times, such as during Ned McWherter's second term as governor, the issue has actually made it onto the public agenda, but never has an income tax proposal come anywhere close to being enacted.

Governor McWherter had given many people reason to believe that he would aggressively support tax reform once he was elected to his second term. He had noted the unfairness in the highly regressive sales tax and the system's inability to keep pace with economic growth. However, McWherter did not fully utilize his political resources in seeking to bring about tax reform. Some observers believe that the only chance for a general state income tax would be to embed it in broad-based tax reform enthusiastically marketed by a popular political figure. McWherter never vigorously championed his proposals, and the window of political opportunity soon shut tight. In the increasingly antitax 1990s, serious consideration of an income tax by state politicians seems doubtful. In the 1994 election for Governor, both Republican Don Sundquist and Democrat Phil Bredesen took firm stands against the income tax.

While a substantial minority of Tennesseans favor a state income tax, the weight of public opinion is clearly on the other side (see table 1). There appears to be very little prospect for change in the climate of opinion on this issue. Rather, any movement appears to be away from support for the income tax. As a policy issue, a state income tax may not yet be dead and buried, but it is clearly "on life support." Although there is a viable, well-funded organization called Tennesseans for Fair Taxation that is committed to keeping the issue alive, most politicians in the state would be more than happy to "pull the plug."



## THE ABORTION ISSUE

Although abortion remains one of the most hotly contested policy issues on the national scene, the debate in Tennessee has not been nearly as contentious. The issue has not figured prominently in campaign rhetoric nor have antiabortion protests in Tennessee been characterized by the violence that other states have witnessed. Still, an examination of Tennesseans' views on this divisive national issue is warranted and revealing.

As table 1 indicates, few Tennesseans want getting an abortion made easier. A substantial minority, approaching a majority, would like to see them made harder to obtain. Does this mean that Tennesseans would support a fundamental change in policy on this issue? To test that hypothesis, we included the following question in the October 1995 survey: "Do you think that the United States Supreme Court should overturn or uphold its 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* which effectively legalized abortion in this country?" Although a substantial minority (39 percent) favored overturning *Roe*, a greater percentage (49 percent) preferred that the decision be upheld (12 percent were not sure).<sup>12</sup> Like Americans generally, Tennesseans are troubled by the abortion issue and would like to see the number of abortions reduced, but most of them do not support a fundamental change in public policy in this area.

In many ways Tennessee has been spared the most divisive political battles on the abortion front. While the pro-life movement has become increasingly active in attempting to elect lawmakers with like views, very few have taken office, despite the Republican electoral successes in recent years. Moreover, organizations such as Operation Rescue have not undertaken major efforts within our state. Perhaps the even split in public opinion, in a broader climate of more moderate conservatism, has injected a bit of caution into the thinking of any politician risking alienating opponents on either side of the issue.

## IDEOLOGY, PARTISANSHIP AND POLICY ISSUES

In Tennessee, as in national politics, ideology and party identification are definitely related, though they are far from synonymous. In our aggregated data, 49 percent of the self-described liberals interviewed by the Tennessee Poll also described themselves as Democrats (see table 3). More than one-third of the liberals (36 percent) preferred the "Independent" label. Similarly, only 42 percent of conservatives identified themselves as Republicans, with 33 percent of them preferring to cast themselves as independents. Looking at the relationship the other way, only 8 percent of Republicans describe themselves as liberals, whereas 24 percent of Democrats espouse the liberal label. Not surprisingly, independents are most likely to self-define as moderates; moderates are most likely to identify themselves as independents. Ideological moderates are more likely to attach themselves to the Democrats than to the Republicans (32 percent to 24 percent), but independents are twice as likely to self-define as conservatives than as liberals (31 percent to 14 percent).

Table 11.3

**ISSUE POSITIONS BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION AND IDEOLOGY (1989-96 aggregated)**

	Democrat	Independent	Republican	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative
<b>Party Identification</b>						
Democrat	—	—	—	49%	32%	25%
Independent	—	—	—	36%	45%	33%
Republican	—	—	—	15%	24%	42%
<b>Ideology</b>						
Liberal	24%	14%	8%	—	—	—
Moderate	48%	55%	39%	—	—	—
Conservative	28%	31%	53%	—	—	—
<b>State Lottery</b>						
Favor	64%	64%	57%	73%	66%	54%
Not Sure	6%	5%	5%	4%	5%	5%
Oppose	30%	31%	38%	23%	29%	41%
<b>State Income Tax</b>						
Favor	35%	31%	27%	38%	33%	26%
Not Sure	10%	9%	9%	8%	9%	9%
Oppose	55%	60%	64%	54%	58%	65%
<b>Abortion Law</b>						
Easier	13%	10%	7%	14%	11%	7%
About Right	50%	46%	39%	58%	51%	33%
Harder	38%	44%	54%	28%	39%	60%

*Note: Data derived from the Tennessee Poll conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, March 1996.*

In terms of policy issues, Republicans and conservatives are much more likely to favor toughening abortion laws. Both groups also manifest greater levels of opposition to the lottery and to the income tax. However, the relationship between ideology and the income tax issue is very weak, suggesting that ideological orientations among Tennesseans today may have more to do with social and moral questions (e.g., gambling and abortion) than with pocketbook issues.

### REGIONALISM WITHIN THE STATE

Students of state politics have for many years noted that Tennessee is divided into three grand divisions, each of which is culturally and politically distinctive. Our data suggest that regionalism is becoming less significant as a determinant of public opinion (see table 4). While it remains true that East Tennessee is the most Republican of the three grand divisions, the differences in partisan identification across the state are not that pronounced. The same is true of ideology. The East and Middle regions are identical; the West is slightly more conservative. The three regions are indistinguishable in terms of their collective sentiments regarding the lottery and are only marginally different on the abortion and income tax issues. It appears that the state's political culture, once regarded as tripartite in character, has become largely homogenized.

Table 11.4

**PARTY IDENTIFICATION, IDEOLOGY, AND ISSUE POSITIONS BY REGION  
(1989-96 aggregated)**

	East Tennessee	Middle Tennessee	West Tennessee
<b>Party Identification</b>			
Democrat	27%	36%	37%
Independent	41%	41%	35%
Republican	33%	23%	29%
<b>Ideology</b>			
Liberal	15%	16%	15%
Moderate	49%	49%	46%
Conservative	36%	36%	39%
<b>State Lottery</b>			
Favor	62%	62%	62%
Not Sure	6%	5%	6%
Oppose	33%	33%	33%
<b>State Income Tax</b>			
Favor	29%	32%	30%
Not Sure	10%	10%	11%
Oppose	61%	58%	59%
<b>Abortion Law</b>			
Easier	9%	10%	11%
About Right	43%	48%	44%
Harder	47%	42%	46%

*Note: Data derived from the Tennessee Poll conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, March 1996.*

## RACE, GENDER, AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

Racial differences in American public opinion are well documented. Tennesseans are no exception. There are clear differences between Anglos and African Americans in Tennessee on all the variables included in this study (see table 5). By far the most pronounced racial differences are in the area of partisanship, with blacks more than twice as likely as whites to identify as Democrats and whites more than three times as likely as blacks to self-identify as Republicans. Blacks are also somewhat more likely to see themselves as liberals but, interestingly, almost as likely as whites to self-define as conservatives. On the lottery issue, there are no racial differences. On abortion, blacks are somewhat more likely to favor the pro-choice position. As a group, blacks are significantly more supportive of instituting a state income tax.

Our data also reveal something of a "gender gap" in Tennessee with respect to party identification (see table 5). Women are significantly more likely to embrace the Democrats and slightly less likely to adhere to the Republican Party. In terms of ideology, women as a group are less conservative than are men, but the gap is fairly narrow here (indeed, it is within the margin of error and therefore may be a statistical artifact). On the issues, there are some differences, but none are especially dramatic.

Table 11.5

**PARTISANSHIP, IDEOLOGY AND ISSUE POSITIONS BY RACE, GENDER  
AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS, 1989-1996 (aggregated)**

	Male	Female	White	Black	Low Income	Middle Income	High Income
<b>Party Identification</b>							
Democrat	28%	36%	28%	63%	39%	29%	25%
Independent	42%	37%	41%	27%	38%	41%	38%
Republican	30%	27%	31%	11%	23%	31%	38%
<b>Ideology</b>							
Liberal	14%	17%	14%	23%	17%	15%	14%
Moderate	47%	49%	49%	42%	46%	51%	49%
Conservative	39%	35%	37%	35%	37%	34%	38%
<b>State Lottery</b>							
Favor	66%	59%	62%	62%	63%	65%	59%
Not Sure	4%	6%	5%	5%	6%	4%	6%
Oppose	30%	35%	33%	33%	32%	31%	35%
<b>State Income Tax</b>							
Favor	31%	30%	29%	41%	31%	31%	31%
Not Sure	7%	13%	10%	11%	13%	7%	7%
Oppose	62%	57%	61%	49%	57%	62%	62%
<b>Abortion Law</b>							
Easier	10%	10%	9%	15%	11%	10%	8%
About Right	47%	43%	45%	44%	38%	48%	51%
Harder	44%	47%	46%	42%	51%	42%	41%

*Note: (1) Data derived from the Tennessee Poll conducted by the Social Science Research Institute at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, 1989-1996. (2) "Low income" includes respondents whose annual household income is less than \$15,000; "middle income" includes respondents whose annual household income is between \$15,000 and \$50,000; "high income" includes respondents whose annual household income exceeds \$50,000.*

Finally, we come to socioeconomic status (see table 5). As we noted earlier, there is a relationship between income and party identification. In keeping with conventional wisdom, Democrats are, on average, less well off than Republicans. This difference in partisanship does not translate into dramatic ideological differences across income levels, however. Low-income, middle income, and high income Tennesseans do not differ very much when it comes to the three issues either. Of course, one might posit other issues beyond the scope of this study on which dramatic differences would emerge.

## CONCLUSION

Tennessee politics has become more competitive over the last half century. Public opinion data collected over the last eight years paint a picture of a state whose electorate may be flirting with a switch to a period of Republican dominance. But, as of 1996, the Democrats remain competitive.

Tennesseans have cemented their opposition to an income tax and have concretized their support for a lottery, but they remain sharply divided on abortion. Remarkable consistency characterizes the latter two issues. No definitive evi-

dence yet exists to indicate whether Tennessee voters will continue a more conservative, Republican drift, and whether this drift will lead to a more conflictual political environment, especially concerning the abortion issue. In terms of the state's political culture, our data suggest that differences among the state's traditional divisions may be disappearing. Indeed, in many ways Tennessee's political culture is increasingly reflective of the nation as a whole. Just as regionalism within the state is becoming less of a factor, regionalism around the country likewise appears to be diminishing. As more and more political communication is nationally based, we would expect these trends to continue.