

**CORRECTION TO THIS ARTICLE**

An Oct. 29 article misspelled the name of Hari Sevugan, communications director for the Maryland gubernatorial campaign of Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley (D).

## Poll Puts Maryland Democrats In the Lead

Races Are Much Closer, GOP Candidates Say

By Robert Barnes and Matthew Mosk  
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A strong Democratic tide in Maryland threatens to swamp [Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s](#) reelection bid and bolsters the party's efforts to retain control of an important U.S. Senate seat, according to a [new Washington Post poll](#).

[Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley \(D\)](#) held a 10 percentage point lead over Ehrlich, and [Democratic Senate nominee Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin](#) had a similar advantage over [Republican Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele](#) among likely voters in the Post poll, which was conducted last Sunday through Thursday. The leads were well beyond the survey's three percentage point margin of error.

The poll of 1,000 voters showed that the state's overwhelmingly Democratic electorate is highly disturbed about national issues -- extremely critical of President Bush, more upset about the war in Iraq than voters in the rest of the country and eager to shift power in Washington from the Republican Party.

Those strong feelings are a heavy weight for Ehrlich and Steele, who four years ago claimed the state's top offices for the GOP for the first time in nearly 40 years and have tried to foster a Republican resurgence in the state.

Steele, whose campaign to replace retiring Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D) has sought to play down his past Republican activism and project an independent image, doesn't do much better in the poll with Democratic voters than Republicans who have gone before him. His appeal to fellow African Americans has not swayed that group.

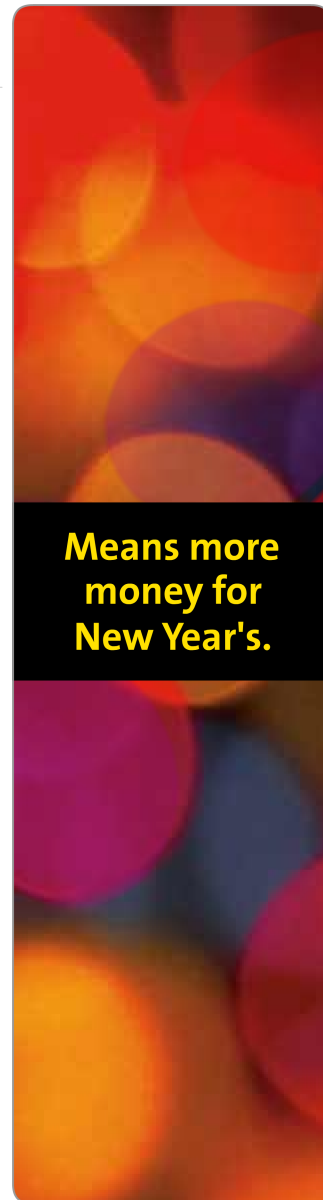
In the governor's race, those surveyed did not seem to view the contest as a referendum on Ehrlich, unlike most reelection campaigns. A majority of voters had a favorable opinion of the governor and said they believe he has done a good job. Nevertheless, one in five of those who approved of Ehrlich's performance as governor said they would vote for O'Malley.

Ehrlich's support among Democrats was half of what exit polls showed it to be four years ago, and voters who described themselves as political moderates returned to the Democratic fold, the poll showed.

The Republican candidates disputed the poll, saying it was too different from recent polls that they had seen that showed the races much closer.

"It is a dead heat, and Michael Steele is gaining ground every day," said Doug Heye, Steele's campaign

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spokesman.

Ehrlich's campaign was especially dismissive of the findings.

"It is simply unrealistic to think that a governor with approval ratings as high as this, who has provided record education funding and cut crime around the state is losing by 10 points to the mayor of the deadliest city in the country," said Bo Harmon, Ehrlich's campaign manager.

Harmon also called the poll's demographics "wildly skewed" since the results reflected few undecided voters. Nearly all the likely voters gave their opinion on how they would cast their ballots if the election were held the day they were interviewed. In a follow-up question, about 15 percent of each candidate's supporters said there was a chance they could change their minds by Election Day.

The poll is not a prediction of Election Day but a portrait of the Maryland political landscape completed 12 days before voters go to the polls. Last-minute developments, campaign spending, get-out-the-vote efforts and enthusiasm for the candidates all could affect the final results.

Especially important will be the African American turnout, which heavily favors Democrats. Blacks make up 28 percent of Maryland's adult population and 25 percent of likely voters in the poll, but some strategists wonder whether the actual turnout will be that high.

### **Invading Ehrlich Territory**

Ehrlich's hopes rest with voters such as Patrick Aldrich, a 39-year-old account manager from Owings Mills in Baltimore County.

"I just find his manner down-to-earth and real. He's not the typical politician," Aldrich said last week, as his 2-year-old son squawked in the background. "His views are things that I agree with."

White, male, parent, in a suburb distant from Washington -- Aldrich represents the kind of voter with whom Ehrlich connected four years ago when he defeated then-Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (D).

But O'Malley, whom the poll shows leading 55 to 45 percent, has cut into Ehrlich's support among such voters and draws strong allegiance from groups that have traditionally supported Democrats but that strayed four years ago.

"These results show that Marylanders want new ideas to help their families, not more dirty tricks and misleading attack ads from a desperate politician," said Hari Sevugen, O'Malley's communications director. "They want a governor who will fight for Maryland families, not one who will fight for the special interests and George Bush."

O'Malley retains support in the overwhelmingly Democratic Washington suburbs, and he also cuts into Ehrlich's previous strongholds in the counties surrounding Baltimore, according to the poll. O'Malley has a 26 percentage point advantage among women, who narrowly supported Townsend four years ago. Many of those who described themselves as moderates abandoned the Democrats in 2002; O'Malley has a 15 percentage point advantage among moderates in the current poll.

The poll continued to show Ehrlich with relatively high favorability ratings and job approval numbers, and unlike in a Post poll in June, a majority of Marylanders now believe that the state is headed in the right direction.

Respondents were just as likely to describe O'Malley as honest, a strong leader and someone with a vision for

the state's future. Voters also said they thought O'Malley would do as well as Ehrlich confronting the issues of crime, taxes and the state economy and gave him a slight advantage on the issue they said was most important for the next governor: public education.

O'Malley was seen as more likely to understand "the problems of people like you" and had a nearly 2 to 1 advantage on "working effectively with the state legislature."

Ehrlich has bombarded the state with ads that skewer O'Malley's leadership of Baltimore, blaming him for the city's failing schools and high crime rate. But voters' views of how things are going in Baltimore did not change from the Post poll in June, and of those who said O'Malley had changed the city, 44 percent said it was for the better, as opposed to 9 percent who said he'd made things there worse.

Just as then-Gov. Parris N. Glendening's unpopularity at the end of his tenure hindered Townsend four years ago, Ehrlich seems to suffer from the national political climate. Although 75 percent of the voters said Bush would not be a factor in the governor's race, nearly 20 percent said one reason for their vote for governor would be to express opposition to Bush.

Henry Evans, 60, a postal carrier from Prince George's County, said he has no problem with the way Ehrlich has done his job but is backing O'Malley. "My reason is that Governor Ehrlich has supported the president and what's going on in Iraq," Evans said. "I'm against that."

### **Factoring In Bush**

The issue is more pronounced in the Senate race, where nearly one in three voters in the poll said their opposition to Bush would be a factor.

Nearly six in 10 likely voters said they "strongly" believe the war in Iraq was not worth fighting, far higher than other Americans, according to a Washington Post-ABC poll this month, and 53 percent of Marylanders polled said it would be a good thing if control of Congress switched from Republican to Democrat, as opposed to 21 percent who said it would be a bad thing.

National GOP leaders have invested more than \$1 million in Steele's campaign, in part because they view his effort as a critical first step in any broader attempt to break the virtual lock on the African American vote that Democrats have held.

Steele has tried to present himself as a different kind of candidate with his out-of-the-box campaign advertisements, criticisms of both political parties and such high-profile supporters as hip-hop recording mogul Russell Simmons and Cathy L. Hughes, the Radio One founder and chairwoman.

But Democrats have sought to link Steele with Bush -- who has a 6 percent approval rating among African Americans surveyed. Steele has support from 14 percent of black voters, not significantly higher than the support Ehrlich is receiving, the poll shows. Overall, Cardin leads Steele 54 to 43 percent, with independent candidate Kevin Zeese receiving 1 percent of the vote.

"Michael Steele's problem is that . . . he's a Republican at the absolute worst time in the world for a politician to be a Republican," said David Bositis, an expert on black voting patterns at the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

Steele's spokesman Heye disagreed: "Michael Steele's message is resonating with African American voters. . . . His message of opportunity, hope and bringing change to Washington has resonated and is continuing to resonate with African American voters."

But Kenneth Kirby, 52, a former airline worker from Annapolis who is black, said he supports Cardin because he's a loyal Democrat. He said he stopped considering Steele "after I learned he was, essentially, a Bush appointee."

Steele gets more than 90 percent of the Republican vote and leads among independents, but, like Ehrlich, he has made little headway among the half of the voters who identify themselves as Democrats. Statewide, 55 percent of voters are registered as Democrats.

Cardin has maintained strong support in spite of projecting a somewhat bland persona during much of the campaign. Likely voters said they consider him the more honest and trustworthy of the two and the one more likely to share their values.

"Michael Steele's attempts to hide his support for the Bush agenda have failed," said Oren Shur, Cardin's spokesman.

But one aspect of Steele's folksy television ads has resonated with voters: He is considered by twice as many voters to have the more appealing personality.

### **Closing the Gap**

The poll's depiction of where the race stood between last Sunday and Thursday presents a hefty burden for the two Republican candidates, said Paul S. Herrnson, a political science professor at the University of Maryland, College Park.

"It's really hard for a candidate to close a double-digit lead in two weeks, particularly if the candidates are already very well known," Herrnson said.

Still, some variables could change the dynamics during the closing weeks. The biggest is turnout. The two Republicans could close the gap if fear about the validity of the state's voting system depresses turnout, or if African Americans -- the most Democratic of voting groups -- aren't enthusiastic about the race.

The Post poll showed that based upon answers to questions such as certainty to vote, enthusiasm about the candidates and interest in the races, about 25 percent of the "likely voters" would be African American.

That is numerically higher than past exit polls have shown: In the past seven elections for president, Senate and governor, the estimate of black voters ranged from 19 percent to 24 percent. But even if the black turnout is as low as it was in the 2002 election -- 22 percent, according to exit polls -- Cardin and O'Malley would still hold leads, although they would be narrower.

Another factor is the financial advantage Ehrlich apparently holds, according to the most recent financial statements the gubernatorial candidates have submitted. As of last week, O'Malley had \$600,000, and Ehrlich had more than \$2 million left to spend during the campaign's closing days.

And one sign of the Ehrlich campaign's get-out-the-vote effort is the record number of absentee ballots that have been requested. Almost as many have been requested by Republicans as Democrats, despite the huge registration differences.

*Polling director Jon Cohen and database editor Dan Keating contributed to this report.*

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