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From the Baltimore Sun

Maryland votes 2006

Governor race a tossup

Ehrlich attacks on crime, schools have eroded O'Malley's Sept. lead

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Sun reporters

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The Maryland governor's race is a virtual tie less than a week before Election Day, as Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s relentless attacks on Mayor Martin O'Malley's record on crime and schools have eroded the Democrat's support in the Baltimore suburbs, a new poll for The Sun shows.

O'Malley, who led by 6 percentage points in The Sun's September poll, has seen his advantage drop to just 1 point, well within the survey's margin of error. Ehrlich, who has spent months trying to convince voters that O'Malley's record as mayor makes him unqualified to lead the state, appears to be consolidating the base of support that in 2002 made him Maryland's first Republican governor in a generation.

The new survey shows O'Malley with 47 percent of the vote and Ehrlich with 46 percent. Green Party candidate Ed Boyd had 2 percent, with 5 percent undecided.

"You can describe the results as dead even," said Keith Haller, president of Bethesda-based Potomac Inc., which conducted the poll for The Sun.

The telephone survey of 800 likely voters, conducted Saturday through Monday, has a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

Through expensive television and direct-mail advertising, Ehrlich appears to be convincing voters in the Baltimore suburbs that O'Malley has failed to effectively reduce crime and improve city schools. Using his huge cash advantage, the Republican governor has steadily whittled down the mayor's lead in overwhelmingly Democratic Maryland. Ehrlich was behind by 15 percentage points a year ago and by 8 points in July.

O'Malley still holds a narrow lead as a result of his strength in Maryland's heavily Democratic jurisdictions of Baltimore City and Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

The mayor has unleashed his own advertising barrage, and is attempting to portray the governor as an advocate for big business and other special interests instead of working families. The poll indicates that O'Malley's message also is effective.

Ehrlich's margin in Baltimore County, long viewed as a crucial battleground in the election, is now 19 percentage points, the poll found, up from 5 points six weeks ago. His margins are also larger in Anne Arundel County, another jurisdiction he carried heavily in 2002, and in the state's rural areas.

In 2002, Ehrlich outpolled Democratic nominee Kathleen Kennedy Townsend by 24 points in Baltimore County, a jurisdiction that provided nearly his entire margin of victory.

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Lewis Cave, 62, who lives in Baltimore County's Hawthorne community, said that after considering television advertisements and news reports, he is no longer among the ranks of the undecided. He is planning to vote for Ehrlich, and his reasoning could come straight from one of the governor's television ads.

"I think [O'Malley] needs to get the city straightened out before he moves on to something bigger and makes bigger mistakes," said Cave, who voted for Ehrlich in 2002. "He screwed up the school system, and seven [police] commissioners, that's ridiculous."

Other voters say that the mayor has put Baltimore on the right track, and question the governor's policies.

William Wright, a Catonsville attorney, said he believes that the Ehrlich administration has been bad for the environment despite the governor's attempt to use the issue for political gain. Wright mentioned Ehrlich's support for bear hunting and the sale of state land to developers as reasons that he'll cast a ballot for O'Malley next week.

The governor, Wright said, "says one thing, does another."

"I think O'Malley is more honest," said Wright, a 62-year-old Republican. "I mean, how in the world can you correct the problems in the city if the people in the city don't want to help?"

A major question in the race is black turnout. The poll showed that the traditionally Democratic constituency is still heavily supporting O'Malley, despite Ehrlich's efforts to make inroads among African-Americans.

O'Malley leads among black voters, 74 percent to 9 percent, while Ehrlich leads among whites, 53 percent to 40 percent.

David Brooks, 59, a retired UPS driver from Brandywine who is black, said he's fed up with Republicans running the country. He said his disillusionment with the national political environment is spilling over into the governor's race.

"I just want a change up there," Brooks said. "Get 'em out of there."

The poll is modeled on an estimate that black voters will make up about 19 percent of the electorate. The figure, consistent with previous Sun polls, is based on generally lower African-American turnout in nonpresidential elections, Haller said.

Ehrlich has said his polling assumes black turnout at 21 percent; O'Malley aides have said they expect the figure will be at least 22 percent.

A Washington Post poll released Sunday estimated black turnout at 25 percent. That survey, which was taken before the Sun poll and used different methods to identify likely voters, showed O'Malley with a 10-point lead.

A rise in estimated turnout among black voter would increase the mayor's lead.

Top African-American Democrats have said in recent weeks that they are concerned about black turnout, largely because two prominent black candidates, former congressman and NAACP President Kweisi Mfume and former Baltimore State's Attorney Stuart O. Simms, lost primary elections for spots on the Democrats' statewide ticket.

Democrats are fielding one black candidate for statewide office, O'Malley's running mate, Del. Anthony G. Brown of Prince George's County. The ticket's other four candidates are white men.

The Maryland Democratic Party has taken steps in recent days to try to shore up voter enthusiasm in the black community. It held a gospel concert and get-out-the-vote rally Sunday in Baltimore. This week, Sen. Barack Obama of Illinois, the only black member of the U.S. Senate, is stumping for Democrats at [Bowie State University](#) in Prince George's County.

But some black voters say they intend to support Ehrlich anyway.

Dottie Moore, a 72-year-old Columbia resident, said she is voting for Ehrlich because she believes O'Malley has been too focused on Baltimore - with unimpressive results.

"It's not that I have anything against O'Malley, I just don't know anything about him, other than that he hasn't done anything for Baltimore in terms of education," said Moore, who retired in 2005 from the post of executive director of the Howard County Community Action Council.

"I haven't deserted the Democratic Party," said Moore, who voted for Ehrlich's opponent in 2002 but gives him credit for choosing a black running mate that year. "Ehrlich hasn't done what I call an excellent job, but he's done what I call a credible job."

Ehrlich has solidified support among conservatives, leading by 69 percent to 23 percent. O'Malley has the strong backing of liberals, 79 percent to 11 percent. But Ehrlich has reversed O'Malley's early lead among moderates. The governor is now leading among that group, 48 percent to 43 percent.

Diane Newsome, 48, a political moderate from Reisterstown, said she usually votes for Democrats but will vote for Ehrlich because she trusts him to look out for her pocketbook.

"I like the fact that he is definitely not going to raise my taxes," said Newsome, a speech pathologist.

While rural Maryland provided a strong base for Ehrlich's 2002 victory, O'Malley has hoped to shave a few of the governor's points on the Eastern Shore and in Western Maryland.

His efforts have paid off with Richard Kurtz, an Easton Republican who supported Ehrlich in 2002 but who said he is voting for O'Malley this time.

He said Ehrlich's closeness to President Bush is enough for him to vote for a Democrat.

"What's changed? A lot has changed for me, as far as stem cell research goes. I'm a heart patient, and I am totally for stem cell research," Kurtz said. "The war in Iraq and Ehrlich's backing of Bush."

By and large, though, it appears that the strongly negative views that Marylanders have of Bush have not rubbed off on Ehrlich. The Sun poll found that 37 percent of Maryland voters surveyed have a favorable impression of Bush and 57 percent an unfavorable impression.

But Ehrlich fares well in that measure, as he has throughout his term. Ehrlich has a 54 percent favorable rating, compared with a 39 percent unfavorable one.

O'Malley's ratio is similar, with 49 percent viewing him favorably and 38 percent unfavorably. Those figures have, however, shown what a toll the governor's race and more years of grappling with the city's problems have had on the mayor. Two years ago, when The Sun last asked the question, O'Malley was viewed positively by 59 percent of voters and negatively by just 9 percent.

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