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*From the Baltimore Sun*

**Maryland votes 2006**

# Steele cuts Cardin's lead nearly in half

## Democrat holding a 6-point advantage

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The race for Maryland's open U.S. Senate seat has narrowed, but Democrat Benjamin L. Cardin holds a 6-point edge, the result of firm support among black voters and strong leads in Baltimore and suburban Washington, according to a new poll for The Sun.

Cardin is ahead of Republican Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, 49 percent to 43 percent, with 5 percent of voters undecided less than a week before the election. The Baltimore congressman's lead has been cut nearly in half, however, since a September Sun survey showed him with an 11-point advantage.

Still, Cardin has solidified his backing among African-American voters, a traditionally Democratic constituency that Steele, the state's highest-ranking black official, has vigorously courted.

Steele is doing well with white voters and rural residents. Steele also appears to have benefited from Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s recent gains in Baltimore and Anne Arundel counties, indicating that the Republican incumbent could have coattails.

"The better Ehrlich does, the better Steele will do," said Keith Haller, whose Bethesda firm, Potomac Inc., conducted the telephone poll of 800 likely voters contacted Oct. 28-Oct. 30. The survey has a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

Kevin Zeese, who has the nominations of the Green, Libertarian and Populist parties, garnered 2 percent of the vote, the poll shows.

A former chairman of the state GOP, Steele has proved a challenging foil for the more experienced Cardin, a 10-term congressman and former speaker of the Maryland House of Delegates. Despite his ties to President Bush, whose top officials persuaded Steele to run and have raised money for him, the lieutenant governor has pitched himself as an independent voice, largely through a splashy television campaign.

Steele also appeared the more genial of the two during a recent debate on NBC's Meet the Press, even though moderator Tim Russert questioned the lieutenant governor aggressively on abortion and embryonic stem cell research. Steele is opposed to both, making him more conservative than the majority of Maryland voters.

"Steele just comes across a whole lot better on TV," said Zach Messitte, director of the Center for the Study of Democracy at <http://www.baltimoresun.com/news/elections/bal-te.md.poll02nov02,1,2752825.print.story?coll=bal-home-head...> 11/2/2006

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Some black registered Democrats say they are looking past party affiliation to support Steele because he is black, arguing that their party has banked on their support for too long without promoting African-Americans on its statewide ticket.

Aaron Wilkes, a Democrat from Baltimore who is black, said he supported former NAACP leader Kweisi Mfume in his party's Senate primary but that he'll cast a vote for Steele next week, not Cardin. A 39-year-old state employee, Wilkes said he is willing to overlook policy differences with Steele - on the Iraq war for example, which Steele supports - to make his point.

"The Democratic Party took my vote for granted," Wilkes said. "I felt by voting for Mr. Steele, it would show the Democrats my vote couldn't be taken for granted."

Though the Steele campaign has sought to fuel dissatisfaction among black voters with the Democratic Party, the poll shows Cardin has increased his lead among African-American voters since September.

The survey indicates that 74 percent of blacks back Cardin, compared with 12 percent for Steele. The last poll showed that 64 percent were for Cardin and 23 percent supported Steele.

The Sun poll is modeled on 19 percent black turnout, Haller said.

White voters, meanwhile, prefer Steele - as they do Ehrlich. Steele has a 7-point advantage over Cardin among whites.

But how white voters answer a phone survey could differ from how they vote when an African-American candidate is on the ballot, Messitte said.

Polls are not always accurate when it comes to attitudes about race, Messitte said. "When they have to actually vote, they vote a different way," he said.

Stanley Lechner, a Baltimore Republican who is supporting Ehrlich, said he will vote Tuesday for Cardin. He said he does not approve of Steele's opposition to abortion rights and funding for embryonic stem cell research.

Lechner, a veteran who voted for Bush in 2000 and 2004 and who is white, also said he believes Steele's television ads, which criticize Cardin for taking special-interest money, are misleading.

"I don't think he's Senate material," Lechner, 75, said of Steele.

Though Ehrlich and Steele have avoided each other on the campaign trail, the lieutenant governor has picked up support in communities where the governor is performing well, including Ehrlich's home county of Baltimore, which Cardin represents in Congress.

Voters in Baltimore County support Steele over Cardin, 51 percent to 40 percent. Ehrlich's strong support there four years ago carried him into the governor's office.

"It looks like Steele is starting to emulate the Ehrlich base in the Baltimore suburbs and in other parts of the state," Haller said.

Steele, like Ehrlich, is also ahead in Anne Arundel County. He leads Cardin, 47 percent to 39 percent.

But Cardin is outperforming Steele in Steele's backyard, Prince George's County, an African-American stronghold in which the lieutenant governor is working hard to make inroads. This week, he was endorsed by several black Prince George's Democrats, including former County Executive Wayne K. Curry and five members of the County Council.

Cardin is ahead there, 64 percent to 18 percent. In the September survey, Steele fared better: 32 percent to Cardin's 61 percent.

The good news for Steele in Prince George's is that more voters say they are undecided now than a month ago - 13 percent in the latest poll compared with 3 percent in September.

In Montgomery County, Maryland's most populous jurisdiction, Cardin is also ahead: 59 percent to 34 percent. Baltimore City backs Cardin as well, 70 percent to 12 percent.

There are other bright spots for Steele. He holds an edge with self-identified independent voters. He and Cardin also do equally well - 45 percent - with voters between the ages of 50 and 64. Older voters frequent the polls more reliably than their younger counterparts.

Steele's favorable ratings are also slightly higher than Cardin's: 51 percent of voters think well of Steele, compared with 49 percent for Cardin. His unfavorable ratings are stronger as well - 39 percent to Cardin's 33 percent.

In the waning days of the race, the challenge for Steele is to continue to distance himself from Bush and the national GOP, as both struggle to buck up public perception of the Iraq war and to rebound from the Mark Foley page scandal. Cardin, Haller said, should emphasize his policy views and experience.

"It's sort of his race to lose," Haller said of Cardin.

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