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Ehrlich pulls neck-and-neck with O'Malley

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Annapolis - Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, the Democratic candidate for Maryland governor, has as little as a 1 percent lead over his opponent, Republican incumbent Gov. Robert Ehrlich, according to two polls conducted less than two weeks before Tuesday's general election.

A leadership fellow at the University of Maryland said that could mean Maryland voters may not know who their governor is until all the absentee ballots are counted.

"It may be a while before we know who the next governor is," said Peter Shapiro, a senior fellow at the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership. "For most of the race, they've been running within a margin of error."

A Rasmussen Reports poll from Monday showed a dead-heat race with O'Malley getting support from 49 percent of the 500 people polled and Ehrlich getting 48 percent. A Baltimore Sun poll held last week also showed O'Malley leading by a single percentage point.

A political science professor at Towson University said Thursday that "it's too late to change the flow of the argument," and O'Malley needs to shore up support in the race's final days.

"He lost this campaign," said Joseph Rudolph Jr. "I don't know whether he will lose the election, but he's lost this campaign."

Rudolph said undecided voters have rallied to Ehrlich in part because the O'Malley campaign failed to capitalize on momentum generated by the Sept. 12 primary. Ehrlich portrayed O'Malley as a weak mayor with a questionable record, Rudolph said, and O'Malley went weeks without countering the attacks.

"Ehrlich negatively defined him," Rudolph said.

The candidates have traded attack ads over the past month with Ehrlich criticizing O'Malley's record on crime and education in Baltimore. O'Malley's ads have refuted those claims with both citizens and regional politicians saying that, while Baltimore is far from perfect, it has improved both in public safety and economic strength under O'Malley.

But a sudden shift in poll numbers in the last days of an election is nothing new in a race, Rudolph said.

"There is a movement certainly of the uncommitted and maybe the soft votes," Rudolph said. "What usually happens is the movement is in one direction. The movement has been very striking with a week to go in the campaign."

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