The Elway Poll

An independent nonpartisan analysis of public opinion trends in Washington and the Northwest

12 OCT 2010

Murray Firming Up Lead Over Rossi, Tops 50%

A week before ballots start arriving in mailboxes and days before their first debate, Democrat incumbent Patty Murray appears to be solidifying her lead over Republican challenger Dino Rossi. In the *Elway Poll* of 450 likely voters completed last night, Murray led Rossi by a margin of 51% to 38%, with 11% still undecided. When those 11% were asked toward which candidate they were "leaning," an additional 4% said Murray and 2% said Rossi, giving Murray a 55-40% lead.

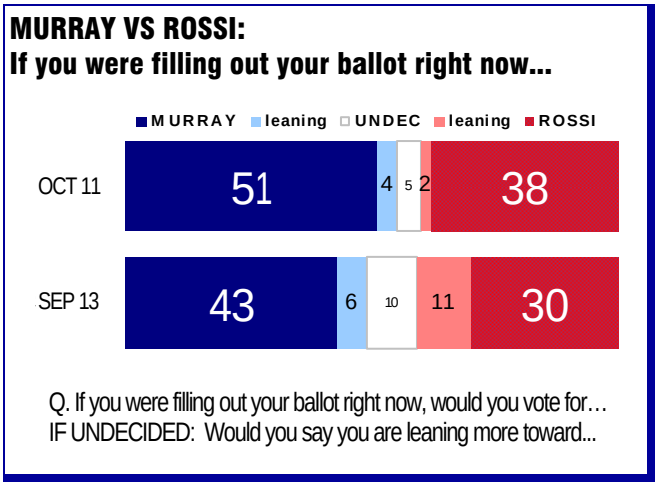
One month ago, Murray led by a 50-41% margin. Murray has gained in each of the last three Elway Polls, from 47% to 50% to 55%, while Rossi has stalled at 40-41%.

Counting the "leaners," Murray has gained ground among:

- Independents. She led Rossi 48-42% among Independents, after trailing him 43-38% last month.
- Men. She led 53-41% after trailing 44-45%.
- Higher income voters. Murray led Rossi 51-44% among those earning more than $50,000 a year, up from 49-48% last month.
- Seniors. She increased her lead from 47-44% last month to 59-36% this month.

Rossi gained among:

- The self employed, going from a 48-43% lead last month to 57-41% this month.
- Private sector employees. He was behind 40-51% last month, but increased to 48-47% this month.



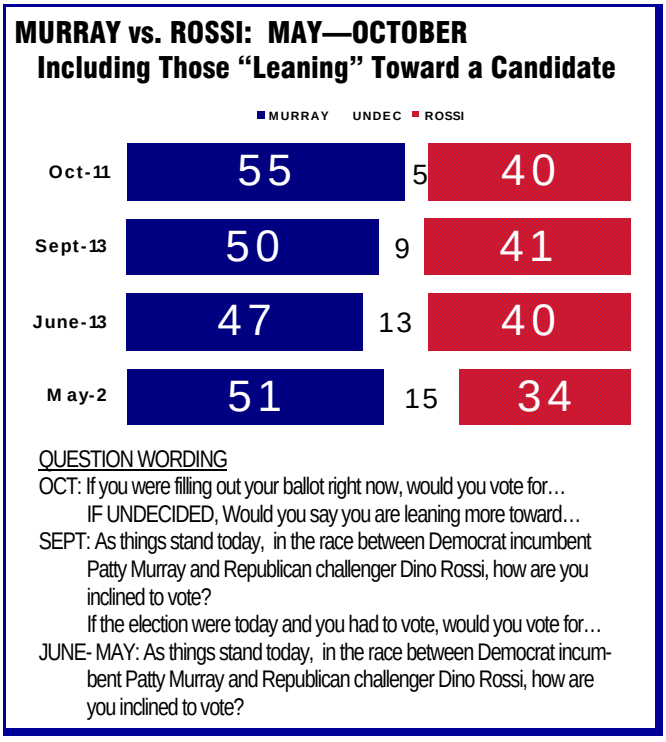
Given the story line that this is a tight race, these results will come as a surprise to many and as unbelievable to some. Yet they are in line with the trend of other, non-automated surveys (see p.3).

This survey interviewed only likely voters—defined as those who had voted in at least 2 of the previous 4 elections, plus voters who have registered since the 2008 election. This represents 68% of all registered voters in Washington—just about what the Secretary of State is predicating for voter turnout.

The demographic profile of this sample matches the samples all year, and matches the profile of likely voters. In addition, the results on the initiative races are well within expectations.

We even interviewed an extra 50 randomly selected voters for the Senate race, lowering the margin of sampling error to ±4.6%.

All of these findings support the conclusion that the sample is a reliable reflection of Washington likely voters.



What About the Undecided Voters?

One of the challenges of election polling is determining what to do with respondents who are undecided. The philosophy here has always been to let them be undecided. After all, it is still 3 weeks until election day and the purpose of a survey is to describe the campaign situation today—not to predict the outcome. As a consequence, *The Elway Poll* routinely indicates more "undecided" voters than other surveys—a position that fails to satisfy the partisans, often resulting in charges of incompetence and/or bias from partisans on the short end of data.

So what if the election were today, instead of 3 weeks from now? The table at right illustrates four common ways to allocate the undecided voters in our current sample. To provide the widest latitude, we included those "leaning" toward a candidate back into the undecided pool in this table.

ALLOCATING UNDECIDED RESPONDENTS
(4 MODELS)

ALLOCATION MODEL	MURRAY	ROSSI
Initial Response	51%	38%
1) Include "Leaning" Response	55%	40%
2) Same as Decided Voters	57%	43%
3) Split Evenly	57%	44%
4) 75% to Challenger	54%	46%
5) Weight by Party ID	51%	49%

1. Push undecided respondents to indicate which way they are leaning. In this survey, that resulted in the widest margin for Murray.
2. Allocate undecided respondents in the same proportion as the decided voters, essentially ignoring the undecided. A tacit assumption in this model is that most of the undecided voters will not vote.
3. Divide them evenly—each candidate gets half of the undecided.
4. Allocate most of the undecided voters to the challenger, on the assumption that the election is largely a referendum on the incumbent, and if voters were going to vote for her, they would know it already. (Never mind that the undecided voters in this survey broke 2:1 for Murray when asked how they "leaned").
5. Allocate them according to Party Identification. Using a "secret sauce" formula, estimate how many votes each candidate could expect based on the party identification and adjust all the totals accordingly. This is similar to weighting the data by party identification, which is done by some of the national pollsters.

This sheds some light on why recent national polls show the race so close. At least one of the national automated pollsters statistically weights their findings by party, which results here in a 2-point margin. Note that the party model predicts that Murray will get zero of the remaining undecided voters, including those already leaning toward voting for her.

This analysis illustrates Rossi's challenge. According to this survey, there are simply not enough undecided voters left.

One path for Rossi is to bring new voters into the electorate—people who were not in the "likely voter" sample. This is where Tea Party voters may help, assuming that there are a significant number who are not "likely voters." Sufficient help from that quarter seems problematic for two reasons. First, it is not clear that Tea Partiers are disproportionally less likely voters. Second, Rossi has consciously not courted the Tea Party constituency.

This means Rossi must take votes away from Murray. He must convince enough Murray supporters to switch sides, which puts a premium on the two debates and on making an effective "closing argument" in the final three weeks of the campaign.

Poll Dancing

One thing everybody seems to know about this US Senate race is that it is extremely close. The poll you are reading is an outlier in that story line. There have been at least 25 published polls on this Senate race since the first of the year and they have bounced all over the place. One pollster alone has published 6 polls with Murray in the lead and 5 with Rossi in the lead. Just since the August primary, Rossi has been ahead in 5 polls and Murray ahead in 8. Each new poll is reported as evidence of a volatile electorate and a tight race. But are the voters that volatile?

Is it logical that the voters should be so volatile when the issues and both candidates are so well-known? (Yes, Murray has been in the Senate for 18 years, but Rossi has been on the state ballot more often than Murray since 2004.) Could it be that the surveys are the volatile factor, and the voters not so much?

It is true that any single poll is just a "snapshot it time" and therefore needs to be considered in context. With so many polls, one logical thing to do is to take an average of poll results as the best estimate of reality. Simply averaging the polls does not necessarily improve the picture, however, because not all surveys are created equal. Methods matter. The published polls in this race differ in significant ways:

Sampling strategies. The national pollsters sample from the general population and use random digit dialing to call households. Respondents are asked if they are registered and likely to vote. *The Elway Poll* and others select respondents from lists of registered voters.

Data Weighting. Many of the national pollsters statistically weight their raw data to match the characteristics of the population. Results can differ based on the assumptions used to weight the data. *The Elway Poll* does not weight data, with 1 or 2 exceptions in 18 years.

Calling Methods. A significant development in recent years has been the rise of automated surveys, which use a recorded voice to ask questions. Respondents answer using the touch tone key pad on their phone. Traditional surveys uses live interviewers to ask the questions and record the answers.

What difference does all of this make? The graphs at right display trend lines from the published polls in the Murray-Rossi race. What is striking here is the difference in results between automated interview and live interview surveys.

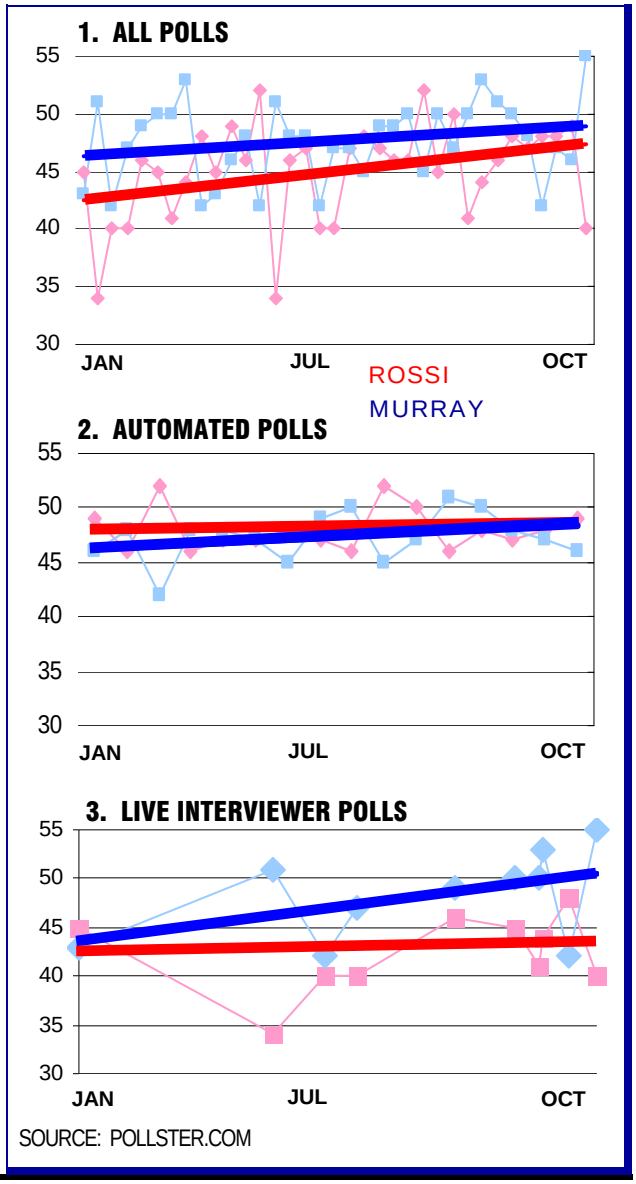
Graph #1 displays the trend line for all 25 published polls in this race since January. It shows why the race is considered to be close. Graphs #2 and #3 separate the two types of polls with quite different results.

Graph #2 shows the trend line of the 16 automated polls. It shows a tight race all year long, with Rossi slightly ahead most of the year.

Graph #3—the 9 live interviewer polls—shows Murray more than slightly ahead all year, with a growing lead over time.

To quote the Buffalo Springfield anthem, "There's something happening here. What it is ain't exactly clear." Of course, "the only poll that matters" is the election. As we have seen this year, however, early polls go a long way to determining how the race is covered by the media and understood by the voters.

WA SENATE POLLS: COMPARISON OF METHODS



SOURCE: POLLSTER.COM

Sample Profile

Telephone interviews were conducted by live, professional interviewers with 450 likely voters selected at random from registered voter lists in Washington state October 7-11, 2010. The number of interviews was proportional by Congressional District. The margin of sampling error is ±4.6% at the 95% level of confidence. This means, in theory, had this same survey been conducted 100 times, the results would be within ±4.6% of the results reported here at least 95 times.

REGION
- King County 26%
- Pierce + Kitsap 16%
- North Sound (Snohomish to Whatcom) 19%
- Western Washington (Clallam to Clark) 19%
- Eastern Washington 20%

GENDER
- Male 48%
- Female 52%

AGE
- 18-35 ..... 8%
- 36-50 ..... 19%
- 51-64 ..... 36%
- 65+ 35%

PARTY IDENTIFICATION
- Democrat 39%
- Republican 26%
- Independent 35%

VOTE HISTORY (LAST 4 ELECTIONS)
- Registered since 2008 election 5%
- 2 of 4 ..... 20%
- 3 of 4 ..... 25%
- 4 of 4 ("Perfect Voters") 50%

EMPLOYMENT
- Self-Employed 11%
- Private Sector 23%
- Public Sector 16%
- Not Working 8%
- Retired 40%

INCOME
- $25,000 or less 15%
- $25 to $50,000 ..... 23%
- $50 to $75,000 ..... 20%
- $75,000 or more 26%
- No Answer 17%

The Elway Poll

The Elway Poll is an independent, non-partisan analysis of public opinion in Washington and the Northwest available exclusively to subscribers.

SUBSCRIPTION: An annual subscription is $250.

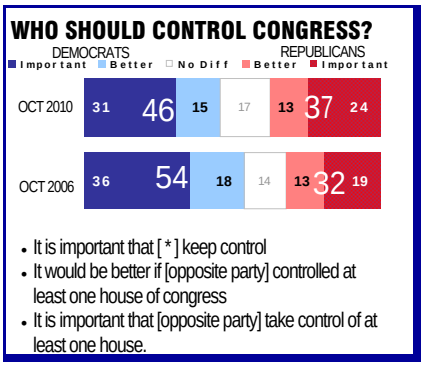
PROPRIETARY QUESTIONS: Each month, space is reserved in the questionnaire to allow subscribers to insert proprietary questions. The fee for proprietary questions is $500 per question. You will receive the results of your question(s) with full crosstabulations within three days.

CROSSTABS: A full set of cross-tabulation tables for any survey is available for $100.

The Elway Poll
7107 Greenwood N.
Seattle, WA 98103
206/264-1500 FAX: 264-0301
elway@elwayresearch.com

Plurality Prefers Democratic Control of Congress

A 46% plurality of these voters preferred that Democrats keep control of Congress, including 31% who said it is "important" that Democrats keep control. Some 24% said it was "important" for Republicans to take control of at least one house, and another 13% thought it would be "better" if Republicans controlled at least one house.



Republicans had control of both houses of Congress and the White House in the last mid-term election (2006). In October of that year, a 54% majority of Washington voters wanted Democrats to take control of at least one house, including 36% who said it was "important" that they do so.