

ELECTION 2006

Davis trims Crist's lead

But a poll shows the Democrat still faces an uphill battle in the governor's race.

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TALLAHASSEE -- Democrat Jim Davis has cut Republican Charlie Crist's once-sizable lead to 7 percentage points in the race for governor heading into the final weekend before Election Day, an Orlando Sentinel poll showed Thursday.

But the survey shows that Davis still faces a tough road to victory. His strategy of tying the Florida race to the national political woes of Republicans doesn't appear to be taking hold. And he's still losing one of every five Democrats to Crist.

Davis had trailed by 11 percentage points in a similar survey taken more than two weeks ago and by 16 points in July. But two statewide television debates seem to have helped him attract more voters his way against the better-financed Crist.

"We're very encouraged," Josh Earnest, a Davis spokesman, said. "At this stage in a race, you look for trends, and the numbers seem to be moving in our direction."

Crist leads Davis by 50 percent to 43 percent, with 6 percent still undecided and 1 percent supporting other candidates, according to the telephone poll of 625 registered voters. The margin of error is 4 percentage points.

"Davis is closing the gap, but Crist still has the financial resources to drive his message home on television in these last few days," said Brad Coker, managing director of Mason-Dixon Polling & Research Inc., which conducted the survey.

"In the end, that might prove the difference," Coker said.

Crist has raised a record \$18.8 million for the governor's race, or triple what Davis has collected.

More important, the Republican has \$3 million still in the bank heading into the homestretch, double Davis' cash on hand.

Cash gap affects reach

The money difference has allowed Crist to air television ads steadily for five months, while Davis has been forced to get by with only a few TV spots since winning the Democratic nomination in September.

"We are encouraged by this new poll, but Charlie Crist remains focused and is running like he's 7 points behind instead of 7 points ahead," Erin Isaac, a Crist spokeswoman, said.

The survey, taken Tuesday and Wednesday, has a margin of error of plus-or-minus 4 percentage points.

In the campaigns' closing days, Davis is trying to draw ahead by catching the back draft of what appears to be a national anti-Republican fervor that is threatening the party's control of Congress.

In their final debate Monday night, Davis, a Tampa congressman, repeatedly derided Crist for looking to "stay the course," the phrase used nationally by Democrats to criticize President Bush's handling of the Iraq war.

Davis echoed "stay the course" eight times during the hourlong debate, while condemning Crist's approach to school FCAT testing and property insurance.

But the poll suggests Davis could be having difficulty making the Florida governor's race float on the national political tide.

For example, though 56 percent of Floridians feel the country is "on the wrong track," 38 percent are dissatisfied with the way things are in Florida.

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Similarly, though 39 percent rate President Bush's performance as "excellent" or "good," 64 percent give high marks to outgoing Gov. Jeb Bush, the president's brother.

Governor hits campaign trail

Gov. Bush is expected to campaign today with Crist, the state's attorney general, in Orlando, Jacksonville and Fort Myers, marking his first significant appearance on the gubernatorial campaign trail this season.

The race clearly is becoming combative heading into the homestretch.

In recent days, Crist's deep-pocketed campaign has launched a steady series of television spots attacking Davis.

One of the ads puts a twist to Crist's long-running attack on Davis' attendance record in Congress by warning he would raise taxes and enact dangerous insurance changes.

The ad blisters the Democrat by concluding: "Jim Davis: Bad judgment when he does show up."

The Davis campaign has been pushing back against Republican operatives who distributed Hillsborough County election records claiming he did not vote in the historic 2000 presidential election.

Davis vehemently denies the charge, and an eyewitness emerged Thursday to support his statement.

"I saw him standing in line for an hour to vote," said Susan Fox, 56, a Tampa lawyer who joined Davis on Thursday in Tampa to cast ballots in early voting. "The story that he didn't vote in 2000 is just plain wrong."

Democrats' loyalty wavers

The sniping back and forth may be reflected in the latest poll, which shows each side doing better among key voting bases.

Crist has expanded his lead slightly in conservative North Florida since last month's survey. But Davis' support is spiking in Democrat-rich South Florida, where he now holds a 20-percentage-point lead over his Republican rival, double what it was in October.

Davis holds a narrow lead among independent voters, with 46 percent favoring him versus 43 percent for Crist. But Davis still is damaged by losing 20 percent of Democratic voters to Crist, who is running as a centrist Republican.

In contrast, Davis pulls only 9 percent of Republicans to his side.

"I'm probably going to vote for Charlie Crist because he has more experience in state government, even though I'm a registered Democrat," said Dawn Maynard, 61, a marketer from Casselberry, who was among those surveyed.

"He's closer to what's been going on, and I feel Jeb Bush has done a very good job for us," she said.

But another voter who responded to the poll, Jim Plack of Boca Raton, said he was ready to answer Davis' call for change.

"I just think Jim Davis has more sensitivity to the problems we face in Florida schools right now," Plack, a lawyer, said. "Crist is a Republican who can't really buck Jeb Bush. But we have to make schools better."

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