GOVERNMENT MATTERS
E-NEWS OF NOTE FROM GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

October 13, 2026 Visit us on-line at ERIE Action Network

Election Special Edition: Understanding Political Polls

With the 2026 midterm three weeks from today, political polls are making headlines. Polls can tell us a lot about what voters are thinking—but they don't always match the election results.

Can We Trust the Polls?
The first thing to remember is that a poll is **not a prediction** of who will win. It's a snapshot of what a group of voters is thinking at a particular moment.

As a recent Washington Post article explains, polls can be useful for seeing which candidates are gaining or losing support and which issues matter to voters.

How Do Polls Work?
Pollsters survey a relatively small group of people—by phone, online or text—and use their answers to estimate what a much larger group of voters thinks.

The tricky part is making sure those surveyed represent the people who will actually vote. That has become harder as fewer people respond to surveys. Pew Research Center notes that pollsters use statistical adjustments to help account for those differences.
But pollsters still can't know exactly who will vote—or who might change their mind before Election Day.

What Does the Margin of Error Mean?
Most polls include a "margin of error," a reminder that the results are estimates rather than exact counts.

For example, if a candidate has 48% support with a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points, their actual support could be roughly 45% to 51%.

And margin of error doesn't capture everything that can go wrong. Pollsters may have trouble reaching certain voters or estimating who is most likely to turn out.

Why 2026 Could Be Tricky to Poll

Early and mail-in voting add another wrinkle. Some people may have already voted when they answer a poll, while others may still be deciding whether to vote. Midterm turnout can also look very different from presidential-election turnout.

Polling itself is expensive and time-consuming. An October 6 Washington Post article reports that increased demand this year is putting pressure on polling firms.

It also helps to know **who paid for the poll**. Campaigns and political parties conduct their own polling to guide strategy, advertising and spending. If they release only their most favorable results, the public may not be seeing the full picture.

Look Beyond a Single Poll

Any one poll can miss the mark—or simply capture an unusual group of respondents. Looking at several polls and watching how they change over time usually gives a better sense of a race.

When you see a poll, check who conducted it, how many people were surveyed, when it was taken and its margin of error.

The main takeaway: **Polls are useful, but they aren't predictions.** They offer a snapshot of what voters appear to be thinking at a particular moment. And in the end, the numbers that count are the votes actually cast.