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Massachusetts polls shed little light on upcoming midterm elections

By Jon Cohen
Washington Post Staff Writer
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No matter who wins, the Massachusetts Senate election has turned into the surprise political nail-biter of the new year. But the mystery remains: Why?

Has Republican [Scott Brown's apparent surge](#) represented a revolt against [President Obama](#)? Is Democrat Martha Coakley suffering because of her party's national health-care reform effort? An unpopular Democratic governor? Statehouse corruption? Her gaffe about Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling?

Everyone has a theory. But there is precious little in the way of concrete data to support any particular explanation -- because few polls of the more than a dozen polls of this race have even sought one -- suggesting that what's about to happen in Massachusetts is still difficult to understand, and likely to remain so.

Only one of Monday's five publicly released Massachusetts Senate polls asked prospective voters anything beyond their ballot preference, opinion of the candidates and a few demographics. The five late polls also produced disparate estimates -- ranging from a tie to a nine-point bulge for Brown -- adding to the confusion about the status of the race.

If the shallow polling in Massachusetts represents a trend, the rest of 2010 may be no better.

Good survey research clarifies, providing data about "why" prospective voters make choices, both in terms of whether they will vote and how they will cast their ballots. Producing a solitary [horse-race](#) number is essentially a publicity stunt. That number may end up hitting the mark, but without any explanatory information behind it, it's of no value to understanding the election.

Analysis of the battle for Massachusetts is hampered not only by the shallowness of many of the pre-election polls, but also because there is no Election Day [exit poll](#). Without these analytical mainstays, pundits of various stripes are free to spin to their hearts' content about what this election means.

(Exit polls take a long time to plan and implement; a month ago [this race did not appear destined for such drama](#).)

Regardless of the outcome, coverage of this election and its polls point to potential problems in understanding what's happening in both the tense health-care debate on Capitol Hill and the raft of congressional campaigns ahead.

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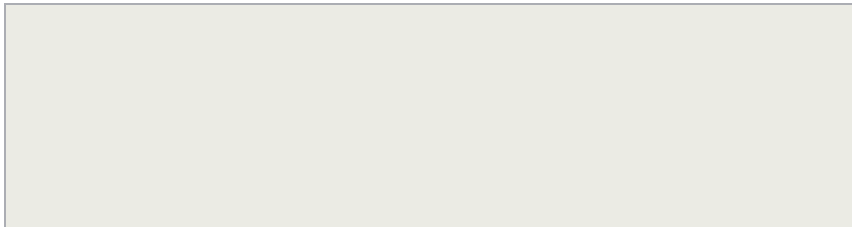
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