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## Md. Democrats Are Looking Good, Which Has Them A Bit Worried

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Maryland Democrats finished their primaries yesterday, but their leaders go into the fall campaign feeling more uncertain about their election chances than they have in 40 years. It's a strange phenomenon, given that the opposite shift in mood is happening nationwide.

Nationally, political observers forecast that congressional Democrats could return to power in Washington and that President Bush's sagging popularity is making it a tough year to be a Republican. But in Maryland, one of the nation's most reliably Democratic states, party leaders fret about November even as they express optimism about their ticket.

"We've got to view this like it's one of the major elections in our lifetime," said Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, the Baltimore Democrat who is former chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus.

The nervousness is understandable. Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. rocked Democratic confidence by becoming the state's first Republican governor in 36 years. But it's also a bit surprising, given that the primaries have turned out pretty much the way Democratic leaders had hoped at the beginning of the campaign.

Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, the photogenic, well-spoken insider's choice, was spared a bruising primary fight after Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan dropped out of the gubernatorial race this summer. What could have been a raucous, rough-and-tumble primary to replace retiring Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D) instead was marked by comity and gentlemanly disagreements between front-runners Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin and former NAACP president Kweisi Mfume. And after four years of a Republican in the state's top job, the GOP has not connected with voters in a way that alters the 2-to-1 voter registration margin that Democrats enjoy.

The unpopularity of the war in Iraq and Republican positions on national issues -- such as abortion, energy and health-care policy -- that apparently are at odds with the views of many Maryland voters would seem to add up to a bleak picture for Republicans.

But neither Republican nor Democratic leaders buy that scenario.

To a great extent, the outcome of the election and the future of partisan politics in Maryland will depend on how Ehrlich and Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele, the U.S. Senate nominee, distance themselves from the GOP's national image.

"It's a superficial analysis to say that because Republicans are on the run nationally, all Republicans are in trouble," said Chip DiPaula, who managed Ehrlich's campaign in 2002 and is now his chief of staff.

Ehrlich, who enjoys good job-approval ratings and favorable impressions from voters even as he trails O'Malley in opinion polls, has opened his television campaign with the message that "he governs from the

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middle." Steele's commercials portray him as an outsider willing to stand up to both parties in Washington.

"Each state has its own dynamic," said House Speaker Michael E. Busch (D-Anne Arundel). "Any incumbent governor, I think, is very hard to beat. I don't care what political party he's in. But the voter base here favors us, and the national trends favor us, so we see an opportunity."

In what has become a mantra for the party, Busch added: "I don't think the Democrats can take anything for granted. Taking things for granted is how we got in this position to start with."

Paul S. Herrnson, a University of Maryland professor who is also director of the Center for American Politics and Citizenship, said: "They [Democrats] dominated the state of Maryland for so long they aren't used to the competition. It used to be they could put up any candidate, even a terrible candidate, and win. And 2002 showed that doesn't work anymore."

Even the state's late primary, he said, is the remnant of a system in which winning the Democratic nomination guaranteed victory. "If they had the primary earlier, by now they'd be out there reaching out to voters. Instead, all they've done until now is to define the other Democratic candidates."

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Calvert) said he's "enthused about the fall -- and confident."

He predicted that O'Malley will be a strong candidate in the Baltimore suburbs where Ehrlich dominated four years ago. "He's going to have to make them up in [traditionally Democratic] Baltimore and Prince George's County, and that's not going to happen," Miller said. He contended that the strong showings in individual legislative districts by Ehrlich four years ago, which translated into Democratic losses in the General Assembly, are absent this year.

Miller is more worried about the Senate race. He agreed that national issues that favor Democrats do not automatically become the most important issues in a specific state.

"Maryland is a state of middle temperament," he said. "Race is an issue, gender is an issue, geography -- there are a whole lot of issues other than the Democratic and Republican issues that you think of when you think of Capitol Hill."

A Maryland Democratic strategist who didn't want to be quoted by name fretting about his party's chances was more blunt: "No one really knows how a black Republican will really play."

He added: "There is meta-anxiety about losing the black vote."

Steele's strikingly different advertising campaign has highlighted that concern. One of Steele's commercials features only African Americans praising him, with one voter saying she is going to "cross party lines" to support him. "He's selling his personality, which frankly is appealing," said the Democratic strategist. "His message is: 'I'm a nice guy, I understand you're frustrated with Washington.' "

Steele has carefully played up endorsements from unorthodox supporters such as hip-hop impresario Russell Simmons and played down support from Bush, Vice President Cheney and other national Republican leaders who have helped provide money to air his ads. "Do I look like George Bush?" he asks, when Democrats charge that he is too much like the president.

Democrats comfort themselves that Steele has at times made mistakes indicative of a candidate who has never campaigned on his own and that the spotlight turns brighter on him now that the primary is over and the election becomes a two-man race.

One other comfort for Democrats: Despite the well-funded Republican campaigns, the power of Ehrlich's incumbency and the novelty of Steele's ground-breaking effort, no major poll has yet to show either man ahead.

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