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Jocelyn Augustino/courtesy of office of Ben Cardin
U.S. Rep. Ben Cardin seeks to keep a Democratic hold on the Senate seat from Maryland previously held by Paul Sarbanes.

Ben Cardin, a 'workhorse' with strong Jewish roots, runs a slow but steady race to be Maryland's senator

By Jennifer Jacobson

WASHINGTON, Oct. 5 (JTA) — Ben Cardin's candidacy for the U.S. Senate is both dogged and buoyed by his stubborn rootedness — a prosaic quality the Maryland congressman and his supporters agree stems from his Jewish commitment.

News media have cast this election as a race between Cardin, a 62-year-old Democratic elder statesman known as a plodding, determined consensus-builder, and Lt. Gov. Michael Steele, 47, an African American Republican who has made a splash in a short time in politics.

"Steele has an advantage of being much more telegenic and a better show horse kind of politician," says Paul Herrnson, the director of the Center for American Politics at the University of Maryland. Cardin, on the other hand, is a "workhorse, not a show horse. Elections are much more about show horses."

The congressman from Maryland's 3rd District is running for the seat vacated by Sen. Paul Sarbanes, a Democrat. Republicans have devoted plenty of resources to getting one of the party's few black candidates elected to a seat long held by Democrats.

Steele appears outgoing and well-dressed. In one TV ad, he snuggles a puppy. Cardin pushed back with an ad that said Steele also snuggled up to Bush.

In the most recent polls, Cardin leads Steele 47-41 percent, with 12 percent undecided.

Cardin's campaign emphasizes his 40 years of legislative experience. His supporters say his years in the Maryland House of Delegates and then in the U.S. House of Representatives, along with his reputation for bipartisanship, will

ensure him a victory.

They say his willingness to cross party lines and his positions on abortion (he's pro-choice) and stem cell research (he supports it) appeal to a majority of Maryland voters, where voter registration is predominately Democrat.

Steele's spokeswoman, Melissa Sellers, notes that The Baltimore Sun named him a "winner" of the 2003 legislative session for his bipartisan efforts. Last month he unveiled the "Steele Democrats," a group of registered Democrats who are supporting him.

There is "a large, diverse base of support that is supporting Michael Steele," Sellers says, "because he's a fresh voice for change from business as usual in Washington."

Herrnson says Steele is savvy to cast himself as an agent of change — but he says the best counterattack for Cardin is to stay true to himself.

"The best strategy for Cardin is to run on who he is" and "point out who Steele is," Herrnson says, someone "who spent his career trying to elect George Bush," the president who has wallowed between 30 and 40 percent in approval ratings for over a year.

Cardin's supporters say his strong identification as a Jew is the key to his solid, if stolid, reputation.

"I can remember when Ben first went to Annapolis," says Myrna Cardin, his wife of more than 40 years. There "really weren't many Jews. And he kind of made a vow to himself that he would be a proud Jew wherever he went. I do think this has kept him in good stead, that he's not hiding from his religion."

Cardin says Judaism informs the decisions he makes as a lawmaker.

"What my Jewish background teaches me, the concept of giving back, tzedakah, has always been part of my life," he says, seated in the U.S. Capitol one recent morning where he spoke to JTA between votes on border security amendments.

He also cites tikkun olam, the Jewish tenet of repairing the world. He remembers with pride his first year in the Maryland General Assembly, when he put up a backstop in a neighborhood basketball court. "My father told me I could make a difference," he says.

Cardin's father, Meyer, served in the Maryland House of Delegates and was a judge. Cardin says his father's activism, especially in the Zionist cause, inspired his own, as did the close-knit Jewish community.

Cardin says his public school was 98 percent Jewish and his synagogue was right down the street from his home. "I was 7 or 8 years old before I realized that not everybody in the world was Jewish," he says and laughs.

"His family is the essence of what Jewish Baltimore is all about," says Art Abramson, the executive director of the Baltimore Jewish Council.

Cardin's first cousin by marriage is Shoshana Cardin, a veteran Jewish communal leader who has held many state and national positions, including past chair of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, past president of the Council of Jewish Federations and JTA, among other organizations. His wife is a past president of the Baltimore Jewish Council and Jewish Community Center. Cardin's nephew, Jon Cardin, is a delegate in the Maryland Legislature.

Cardin's "always been there for us on issues concerning Israel and world Jewry," Abramson says. Cardin is the ranking member of the Helsinki Commission, the congressional agency that monitors human rights at home and

abroad.

Abramson also says Cardin earns Jewish points for being strong on social justice issues such as health care and energy. Cardin says a Senate berth will help him advance universal health coverage and energy independence.

But Cardin is no ideologue, friends say. "He's a guy who I think compromises," says Samuel "Sandy" Rosenberg, a Maryland delegate and a Democrat who served with Cardin in the Statehouse. "He wants to get the job done."

Cardin cites as an example of bipartisanship the Portman-Cardin bill on retirement savings, written with former U.S. Rep. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), who is now the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

While Cardin's supporters applaud his commitment to the nuts and bolts of legislation, media accounts often say he lacks charisma. Newspaper articles describe him as mild-mannered and less than gregarious. He is short and stocky, with a white ring of hair around his bald head.

Such observations puzzle him. "My grandchildren think I'm the funniest person in the world," he says. "My wife thinks I have charisma."

Myrna Cardin says charisma seems beside the point. "I've never heard a constituent say, 'Ben, tell me a joke, go line dancing with me,' " she says. Instead, voters ask him to help with their Social Security, she says.

She acknowledges her husband is more reserved but says he is genuine. "What you see is what you get."

Cardin's rabbi, Mitchell Wohlberg, who presides over Beth Tfiloh Congregation, Baltimore's largest modern Orthodox synagogue, notes that neither Cardin nor Sarbanes are showboat politicians, yet both are widely respected.

"I don't want you to think this is his rabbi who's just trying to make him look good," Wohlberg says. "He really is good. My son, a Rush Limbaugh Republican, wouldn't hesitate to vote for Ben."

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