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From the Baltimore Sun

Maryland votes 2006

Black vote is expected to be deciding factor

By Doug Donovan
Sun reporter

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For months, Maryland's candidates have focused on the urgency of reaching black voters. And with a new poll for The Sun showing the statewide races tightening, that push becomes critical in the campaign's final days.

Even more of the commercials flooding television and radio mention issues considered important to black voters -- including Democrats saying that Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s lax lead paint removal measures have resulted in the poisoning of children, and Republicans saying that Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley allows police to arrest African-American residents without charging them.

O'Malley frequently tells black audiences that Ehrlich's criticism of Baltimore is veiled "in coded, charged language." In response, Ehrlich's campaign says O'Malley is playing the "race card."

The state Democratic Party's top candidates, O'Malley for governor and Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin for U.S. Senate, have far stronger African-American support than their rivals, according to The Sun's poll. But if black voters stay away, Ehrlich has a far greater chance of beating O'Malley, and Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele will bolster his bid against Cardin.

The poll showed that low black turnout similar to the 2002 governor's race makes the O'Malley-Ehrlich contest a near-even battle, with the mayor garnering 47 percent and the incumbent 46 percent. If more black voters show up, O'Malley is more likely to win, according to the poll.

The poll by Potomac Inc., which questioned 800 likely voters between Saturday and Monday, has a margin of error of 3.5 percentage points.

"Right now, the heat has been turned on for the Democratic Party's turnout efforts to be geared toward black voters," said Baltimore City Councilman Keiffer J. Mitchell Jr., vice chairman for the state's Democratic Party. "The black vote is going to make the difference in a tight election like this."

Mitchell said the party will be doing what it can to get black voters to the polls: organizing rides, making phone calls the night before Election Day and knocking on doors Tuesday.

But the party's goal is complicated by African-American voters such as Diane Newsome of Reisterstown.

Newsome, 48, a speech pathologist and lifelong Democrat, is voting for the top Republican candidates -- Ehrlich and Steele.

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"I want to send a message to the Democrats: Don't just assume you're going to get the African-American vote and that you don't have to do anything to get it," said Newsome, who participated in The Sun's poll.

She says she voted for Ehrlich in 2002 partially because his victory made Steele the first African-American elected to statewide office. She is upset that the Democratic Party did not do more to help the campaigns of two prominent black candidates in the primary -- Kweisi Mfume for Senate and Stuart O. Simms for attorney general.

Her defection is what Democrats have feared since Mfume's narrow defeat resulted in a Democratic slate of four statewide candidates who are all white males -- Cardin, O'Malley, Peter Franchot for state comptroller and Douglas F. Gansler for attorney general. Only O'Malley's pick for lieutenant governor, Del. Anthony G. Brown, is black.

"It is ironic and unfortunate that the Democratic ticket for the four major positions in 2006 looks like the Democratic statewide ticket for the four major positions in 1956," Mfume said in this week's Afro American, his first public comments in weeks.

Mfume made similar comments in late September, shortly after he lost to Cardin. After his words raised concerns, Maryland's 10 black state senators met privately with Cardin and O'Malley to express their anger about the lack of diversity. They also were upset that Brown, the mayor's running mate, was not being featured prominently.

Matthew Crenson, a political scientist at the [Johns Hopkins University](#), said such sentiment -- especially Mfume's comments in the state's major black newspaper -- will only make it harder for the Democratic Party to persuade black voters to cast ballots.

Mfume "doesn't say 'stay home,' but he might as well have," Crenson said.

Steele's endorsement this week from several prominent Democrats in Prince George's County might also help the Republican Party's efforts.

And while O'Malley has received the endorsement of the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance and the backing of many Baltimore-area black officials, observers said what matters is what those leaders do to mobilize voters.

"Endorsements don't mean anything unless there is something to back it up," Crenson said.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, a Baltimore Democrat, knows just how important turnout will be for his party.

"I've often said that the Democratic Party would have heartache if African-American people did not come out and vote in the percentages they do for Democratic candidates," he said. "There's no doubt about it. They are the most loyal constituency."

Cummings said that while he suspects some black voters might throw their support to Steele in the Senate contest, he thinks most will continue to vote Democratic.

"Will Steele get some votes? I think the polls show he will," he said. "But I think when folks give it some deep thought, how Steele made it clear that he still agrees the war should have been prosecuted, people will think about that."

James Everett is the type of voter that Democrats desperately need. The 57-year-old black Democrat, who lives in Capitol Heights in Prince George's County, was set to back Steele over Cardin.

"One of the main reasons I was leaning toward Steele was that he was African-American," said Everett, a retired social worker. "But once I looked at his views [on the Iraq war and President Bush], my opinion of him changed."

In addition to Cardin, Everett said he plans to vote for O'Malley.

Patrice Bassett, 41, of West Baltimore said she and her family intend to vote for O'Malley. But based on conversations with her African-American neighbors and friends, she predicts that the mayor will suffer from low turnout.

"He hasn't stressed what he's going to do for black voters," said Bassett, who was questioned in The Sun's poll.

Mitchell said he worries because there are no local races or issues that are pushing blacks to the polls in Baltimore. And he said Ehrlich has been making a strong push in black neighborhoods, especially through literature drops.

And with tacit support from Baltimore City State's Attorney Patricia C. Jessamy, Ehrlich could further drain black votes from O'Malley.

Some have said that O'Malley's star power in the city's black community is lacking -- despite his easy re-election with strong African-American support in 2003. They point to his support this year for Del. Salima Siler Marriott in a contested state Senate primary -- one of the only candidates for whom he appeared at polls during the primary. Marriott lost badly to Del. Catherine E. Pugh.

But O'Malley largely has the support of labor, including city worker unions and firefighters.

"We're calling them every evening, telling them who we endorse," said Glenard S. Middleton Sr., a statewide leader in the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, a union with nearly 20,000 members -- mostly black -- in Baltimore and Prince George's.

In a speech O'Malley gave this week at a black church, the mayor sounded off on such issues as the war in Iraq and Hurricane Katrina.

"It took us two, three, four, five days before we could drop a pallet of water in New Orleans," he said. "That is not the vision that Rosa Parks refused to stand up for."

O'Malley's campaign has also accused Ehrlich of trying to suppress the black vote by saying people should vote by absentee ballots because regular polling places cannot be trusted.

Ehrlich, who spoke at the same church, Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, a week earlier and received an equally warm reception, has rebutted the accusation.

"I think the African-American vote is more up for grabs than ever," he said. "That's not saying much, since Republicans have generally ignored the African-American vote and Democrats have taken it for granted. We're seeing people look at a Republican administration for the first time."

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