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From the Baltimore Sun

Maryland votes 2006

Democrats maintain big leads in comptroller, attorney general races

By Michael Dresser
Sun reporter

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Democratic nominees hold commanding double-digit leads in the races for attorney general and state comptroller less than a week before Election Day, a new poll for The Sun shows, indicating that Republican chances of upsets in the statewide contests are slim.

Montgomery County State's Attorney Douglas F. Gansler, the Democratic nominee for attorney general, holds a lead of 54 percent to 27 percent in his race against Frederick County State's Attorney Scott L. Rolle.

Rolle gained 1 percentage point since an earlier poll in September. The result indicates that his best shot at the office might be a decision by the Maryland Court of Appeals disqualifying his opponent rather than victory in the political arena on Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Democratic Del. Peter Franchot held on to a 22-point lead in his race for state comptroller. The poll shows that 54 percent of voters - the same percentage as in the September poll - would choose the veteran Montgomery County lawmaker, who upset Comptroller William Donald Schaefer in the primary in September.

Anne M. McCarthy, the Republican candidate for comptroller, had the support of 32 percent of voters, up from 29 percent in September, with 14 percent of the electorate up for grabs.

Franchot, 58, has launched a television campaign in the Baltimore area, seeking to counter Republican accusations that he's a far-out liberal with his pledge to be an aggressive fiscal watchdog. McCarthy's underfinanced campaign has been relying on radio ads to reach voters.

Rolle, 45, who was recruited by Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. to run for attorney general, showed little traction. The only apparent obstacle to Gansler's election is a lawsuit brought by Rolle's campaign manager contending that Gansler, 43, the Montgomery County state's attorney for the past eight years, falls short of the 10 years of Maryland legal experience required by the state constitution.

An Anne Arundel County Circuit Court judge rejected the suit, but the state's highest court decided to hear an appeal today.

Keith Haller, president of Potomac Inc., which conducted the poll, said Rolle's anemic numbers reflect a missed opportunity

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for state Republicans. With Democratic incumbent J. Joseph Curran Jr. retiring after five terms, the position is open for the first time since 1986.

"One would have thought [Rolle] would have come out of the primary with all guns blaring," Haller said.

The pollster said that barring some unforeseen development, Franchot has opened up too wide a lead for McCarthy, 49, to make up in five days and with little money.

"Franchot made all of the right moves after the primary," Haller said. "He went from being this hard-charging liberal to this broad-based fiscal conservative."

The poll of 800 likely voters has a 3.5 percentage-point margin of error, indicating that Franchot and Gansler could win the election if they maintain their current support. Haller said that with a large percentage of the electorate still undecided, he expects about 10 percent of those who cast ballots for governor and U.S. Senate to cast no votes in the attorney general or comptroller contests.

The attorney general is the chief lawyer for the state, and the opinions issued by the office can either empower or constrain a governor's exercise of power. The comptroller is the state's chief fiscal officer and tax collector, and holds one of three seats - along with the governor and the treasurer - on the Board of Public Works, which reviews state contracts.

While Franchot and Ehrlich have long been at odds, the Democrat is attracting about one in five of the governor's backers while McCarthy takes 6 percent of the vote among supporters of Ehrlich's challenger, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley.

John Forestell of Westminster is one such Ehrlich supporter who is backing Franchot. The 70-year-old former teacher, a Democrat who also supports Rolle, said he is choosing candidates he believes will bring independence to those offices.

"I don't want rubber stamps in the office of the attorney general or the comptroller," Forestell said. "You have to have diverse views."

In general, Franchot appears to have done a good job of uniting Democrats behind him after a hard-fought primary. According to the poll, he has the support of 73 percent of Democrats - a stronger showing than either O'Malley or Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin, the party's nominee for U.S. Senate.

But some Democrats are still unhappy about the outcome of the primary.

Debra Wiggins of Columbia, who otherwise is supporting Democrats in statewide races, said she will vote for McCarthy because she believes Franchot won by default against her candidate, Schaefer.

"At least with him, you knew where you stood," said Wiggins, 49. With Franchot, she said, she doesn't know.

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