Political jabs stick with some voters

By Andrew A. Green
Sun Reporter
November 6, 2005

The attack lines for next year’s election are already taking shape.

Political opponents are already saying Mayor Martin O’Malley has left a mess in dirty, dangerous Baltimore. Douglas M. Duncan, the executive of tax-happy Montgomery County, can’t relate to the rest of the state.

Republican Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. heartlessly cleared out government agencies to make room for cronies. The Democrat-controlled obstructionist General Assembly is too liberal and out of touch.

According to The Sun Poll released today, each attack resonates with part of the electorate. But none appears strong enough to sway large numbers of voters.

“There isn’t a slam-dunk theme,” said Steven R. Raabe, executive vice president of Potomac Inc.

And large, the poll shows, voters reacted to the criticisms along party or geographic lines.

The survey, conducted Oct. 27-Nov. 1 by Potomac Inc., polled 1,008 likely voters and has a margin of error of 3.2 percentage points.

It comes as a former Ehrlich aide, Joseph F. Steffen Jr., publicly contended that top administration officials sent him into state agencies to find workers who could be replaced with people loyal to the governor.

Forty-two percent of voters said they agreed with the statement that "the Ehrlich administration is more interested in rewarding its political friends with jobs than in finding the most qualified people to serve in state government." But nearly as many, 39 percent, disagreed with the statement; 19 percent said they were unsure.

For Geraldine Willis, 62, a Columbia Democrat, the dispute over Ehrlich's personnel practices, which are currently under investigation by the Democrat-controlled legislature, just served to increase her distrust of the governor.

"He's a slick package, Princeton grad and the works, but his nominations to government posts - an ice skater for the Port Administration?" she said, referring to Gregory Maddalone, the legislative liaison for the port. "He employed that spy
Steffen to sneak around and fire people? I just don't think he's ethical."

The poll also showed that the governor's attacks on the legislature's Democratic leadership have stuck with many.

After three years of criticism about the failure to pass slots and support for tax increases, 42 percent of voters say they agree that "Democratic leaders in Annapolis are too liberal and out of touch, and they need to allow more of the governor's priorities to move forward."

lightly more voters - 45 percent - said the statement was not accurate.

Carolyn McCarthy, 63, a Republican retired nurse from Cockeysville, said she thinks the legislature never gave Ehrlich a chance.

"It's terrible. This guy's trying to do his job, and everybody just bucks him. These are adult people who are in office, and they act like children," said McCarthy, a Republican.

she said she's not very impressed with O'Malley, either.

There's so much corruption in the city," she said. "If he can't run the city well, I don't think he's going to make it any easier at the next level."

he idea that the mayor "should not be governor because he has left so many problems unsolved in Baltimore," an attack Duncan and other prominent O'Malley detractors such as Comptroller William Donald Schaefer have mounted against him, has gained much less traction.

Just 29 percent of voters said they agreed, while 48 percent disagreed.

"He's [O'Malley] done a good job," said Theresa Phair, a 57-year-old African-American Democrat from Baltimore. "It's all a lot of crime, but you can only do so much in Baltimore." The lack of punch in the criticism of O'Malley's stewardship of the city means Duncan may need to switch tactics, said pollster Keith Haller, the president of Potomac Inc.

You might find conservative Republicans who would buy that line, but it's going to be very hard to do that on a grand scale," Haller said. "It's really tough to run a statewide negative campaign against a fellow Democrat and expect people to shift."

While no candidate from Montgomery County has won statewide office in Maryland in recent years, relatively few voters agree with the proposition that "because he is from Montgomery County, Doug Duncan will have a hard time understanding the needs of greater Baltimore." A third of voters agreed, but 52 percent disagreed.

sentiment about Duncan tracked with geography, not party. More than half of voters in Baltimore City agreed that the county executive couldn't represent the needs of Greater Baltimore, but voters elsewhere - in both the Washington and Baltimore suburbs - disagreed.

everal poll respondents from the Baltimore region said they didn't have anything against Duncan - they just didn't know enough about him.

Thomas Weikert, 48, a Democrat from West Hyattsville who lived in Montgomery County for years, said Baltimore residents would be lucky to experience the kind of success Duncan has achieved in his county.

Baltimore has got a lot of problems," said Weikert, who works for a construction supply company. "With my job, I travel through there a lot, and it's depressing. Some of those places I see over there look pretty bad."

I think Montgomery County is doing pretty good," he said. "They've got all those genome people, and they're building..."
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ke crazy."

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