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From the Baltimore Sun

Maryland votes 2006

Parties in final push for voters

Turnout is key to races for governor, U.S. Senate

By Gadi Dechter
Sun reporter

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With Maryland's close gubernatorial and U.S. Senate races likely to hinge on voter turnout, political parties and interest groups are orchestrating what might be the state's most extensive get-out-the-vote efforts in a midterm election.

From church-organized precinct walks in West Baltimore to elaborate suburban phone bank operations, thousands of volunteers and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been poured into Maryland's vote-flushing armies, each fighting for the same elusive - and potentially decisive - prize: the voter who needs a push to make it to the polls tomorrow.

The state GOP, for the first time, is using a complex outreach model developed nationally to produce votes for Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele and others.

"The Maryland Republican Party has fully implemented the 72-hour program," said state party spokeswoman Audra Miller, referring to the three-day turnout plan, established by the GOP in the 2004 presidential election, that put micro-targeting in the political lexicon.

The term refers to the practice of using consumer data to make educated guesses about prospective voters' propensity to back a candidate or party.

Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman, a Pikesville native, said the national party is paying for the consumer research. A party spokeswoman said the national GOP has invested \$700,000 in Maryland's get-out-the-vote effort, with the goal of making hundreds of thousands of voter contacts in the final three days.

Maryland Democrats insist that they will match, if not beat, the effort. "We have a 120-hour program," said Derek Walker, executive director of the state Democratic Party. "That's five days, not three days."

Walker said the Democrats are also micro-targeting prospective voters in the campaign's final hours. "It's kind of standard procedure now for sophisticated campaigns," he said.

Sophisticated, but untested, said Donald Green, a Yale University professor who has studied get-out-the-vote initiatives.

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Research shows that face-to-face contact by volunteers is the best way to motivate prospective voters, he said.

Both parties say their emphasis in the final days will be on such contacts, and they have been trying to motivate their activists with pep talks from national leaders.

On Friday, AFL-CIO President John J. Sweeney stopped by the United Steelworkers hall in Dundalk to thank about 40 union leaders and activists for their volunteer efforts.

Predicting a "great victory" for progressive candidates nationwide, Sweeney said, "We've got 100,000 workers like yourself doing the precinct walks and the phone banks."

That night, Mehlman swung by a hotel in Hanover to rally about 40 out-of-state volunteers, most in their early 20s, who are among the 120 who have been ferried into Maryland by the Republican National Committee. The volunteers will split their time knocking on doors and making phone calls, said John Gibson, executive director of the Maryland Republican Party.

Democratic officials derided the use of out-of-state activists as proof that Republicans lack the in-state base to mount an effective get-out-the-vote effort.

"They have this traveling band of activists that goes from place to place," said Walker. "They haven't really done anything to build their party here."

Managers of the grass-roots operations all claim to have the most energized foot soldiers and sophisticated strategies, but experts say the state's history of lopsided elections poses daunting organizational challenges for the parties and their allies, particularly in a nonpresidential election in which turnout is typically low.

"The Democrats haven't customarily really needed one in order to get their candidate elected, so they haven't got too much of a grass-roots base in place," said University of Maryland political science professor James Gimpel, a former consultant to the GOP. "And the Republicans are renowned for having pathetically weak organization, except in the places where they least need them."

Turnout, analysts say, is especially important this year, with races for governor and U.S. Senate tightening.

The gubernatorial race between Ehrlich, a Republican, and Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, a Democrat, is a statistical tie, according to the most recent Sun poll. O'Malley's 10-point lead in an earlier Washington Post survey of likely voters assumed a higher black turnout, underscoring the potency of voter turnout in the race for Maryland's top public office.

The national stakes are even higher in the Senate race between Democratic Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin and Steele, the Republican lieutenant governor. A Steele victory could be critical in maintaining GOP control of the Senate. Cardin's 6-point lead, according to the poll for The Sun, is about half what it was in September.

About 61 percent of registered voters went to the polls in Maryland's last three gubernatorial elections, substantially less than the 70 percent to 78 percent in recent presidential elections. Turnout of independent and third-party voters is even lower.

Political parties and interest groups are grappling with shifting demographics and party affiliations. There has been huge growth in voter registration in Prince George's and Charles counties since 2002, much of it among black residents, said Thomas F. Schaller, a political science professor at the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#). Overall, party affiliation is dropping, and there are more registered independents than ever.

Matthew Crenson, a [Johns Hopkins University](#) political science professor and sometime Democratic activist, said the decline of Maryland's Democratic clubs has made the party less effective in mobilizing turnout on Election Day.

"Thirty or 40 years ago, there were Democratic clubs in most working-class and even lower-class neighborhoods, both black and white, and they provided the core of workers on Election Day," Crenson said. "Those organizations have almost entirely disappeared, and so the party work force barely exists."

One grass-roots organization that has partly filled the urban vacuum, he said, is the faith-based nonprofit Baltimoreans United

in Leadership Development. Over the weekend, about a dozen BUILD-affiliated pastors and volunteers at the City Temple of Baltimore Baptist Church made phone calls to prospective voters. Later, they spent an hour knocking on doors in West Baltimore's Upton neighborhood, reminding voters that activists would return on Election Day with vans to take them to polling places.

"We'll knock on every door, and we won't take no for an answer," said BUILD spokesman Rob English, of the 15-van "flush team" that will canvass 30 of the city's lowest-turnout precincts and ferry voters to the polls.

Though BUILD does not endorse specific candidates, a larger -than-expected turnout of its target audience of mostly black voters probably would benefit O'Malley and Cardin, polls suggest.

Also reaching out to Democrats are Republican volunteers at phone banks around the state. Because registered Democrats outnumber Republicans in Maryland by a 2-to-1 margin, the Ehrlich and Steele campaigns need the votes of disaffected Democrats.

"The Republicans have a tremendous disadvantage in this state," said Gimpel, "because they're the ones who have to take the risk of mobilizing Democrats who might not otherwise vote."

One way to mitigate the risk, said Chris Cavey, chairman of the Baltimore County Republican Central Committee, is by calling Democrats who did not vote in the primary election, on the assumption that they are less party-loyal.

On a recent morning, the air at Cavey's phone bank at committee headquarters in Timonium buzzed with the sound of about a dozen volunteers reading short get-out-the-vote scripts into phones. A sign on the wall read "Today's Call Goal: 1600."

"It's the law of large numbers," said Cavey, "just like in any business that you do sales. The more calls you make, the more prospects you have, the more sales you make. Any insurance agent will tell you that."

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