

GOP senators snub election of Miller

Show unity with symbolic protest

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ANNAPOLIS — The entire Republican contingent of the Maryland Senate yesterday boycotted the election of the chamber's Democratic president, saying Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. has tried to stifle their input.

Republican senators said they feel emboldened by their party's recent gains statewide and by support from Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., Maryland's first Republican governor in more than three decades.

"We are much stronger than we used to be," said Sen. Janet Greenip, Anne Arundel Republican. "There is a stronger will in this group of senators."

Despite the Republicans' snub, Mr. Miller, Prince George's Democrat, easily won reelection to a 17th term with votes from the other 32 Democrats in the 47-member chamber.

Still, the abstentions from all the 14 Republicans demonstrated the unity of the caucus and its determination to buck the long-standing Democratic majority.

The Republicans lodged the symbolic protest at the opening of the General Assembly, which typically is a day of ceremony and bipartisan platitudes. And the election of Senate officers usually is a formality because Democratic leaders agree on the outcome in advance of the nominations on the chamber floor.

In past years, most Republican senators had backed the Democrats' choice of Mr. Miller.

Senate Minority Leader J. Lowell Stoltzfus, Eastern Shore Republican, said his caucus abstained from the vote to protest Mr. Miller's plan to change rules to make it more difficult for the minority party to filibuster,

which often is the only way Republicans can challenge Democratic legislation.

The anticipated change would increase from 16 to 19 the number of senators needed to sustain a filibuster and make it almost impossible for Republicans to block legislation.

"It is really an end-in-your-face move," Mr. Stoltzfus said of Mr. Miller's plan. "We feel like this legislature, as liberal as it is and as left-leaning as it is, will walk over the people with strong opinions about tax increases, the Second Amendment, abortion and family values."

Mr. Miller declined to comment on the election boycott. He, however, said he saw himself as the agent of compromise between a Republican faction bent on dismantling government and some Democratic leaders intent on raising taxes and spending more money on government programs.

"I hope they can come together in the middle," he said. "The egos have got to be put aside."

Some Republican lawmakers said Mr. Miller designed the new filibuster rules to help push divisive legislation onto Mr. Ehrlich's desk.

One such bill anticipated this session would ban assault weapons, replacing the federal ban set to expire this year. If the Maryland gun-ban bill passes, Mr. Ehrlich would be forced to choose between vetoing it, thus exposing himself to accusations from the left that he is a pro-gun extremist, or signing it and alienating much of his Republican base.

Without the ability to filibuster or extend debate on such bills, Senate Republicans couldn't provide a line of defense for the governor.

Still, Republicans said they are more relevant in Annapolis now than they have been in years. And they are hunkering down for a confrontation with Democrats.

"With unity among Republican senators and working closely with the governor, we

can certainly have more influence down here," said Sen. Alexander X. Mooney, Western Maryland Republican. Last year, he alone abstained from the vote for Mr. Miller.

"It is becoming more partisan," he said. "You have Democrats acting out their frustration because they no longer have total control. At the same time, the Republicans feel more empowered now."

Mr. Miller, who is the governor's chief ally in his plan to legalize slot-machine gambling at horse tracks, is the subject of an FBI probe into possible illegal campaign donations related to the slots plan.

The FBI is investigating a \$225,000 donation from Joseph A. DeFrancis to a national political committee led by Mr. Miller. Mr. DeFrancis owns the Pimlico and Laurel racetracks and is a potential beneficiary of slots.

The Maryland State Prosecutor's Office recently closed its investigation of Mr. Miller's fund raising after determining that he had not violated state campaign finance laws.

Last year, the legislature's ethics committee reprimanded Mr. Miller for abusing the power of his office when he called two judges on the state Court of Appeals who were considering legal challenges to a legislative redistricting map drawn by the senate president and Gov. Parris N. Glendening, Democrat.