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With seniority, Sarbanes rises

Leader: Thanks to being re-elected to his fifth term, Maryland's senior senator leads a major committee and had the power to get a reform approved this summer.

By THEO LIPPMAN JR.
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Paul S. Sarbanes — Maryland's senior Democratic senator — has seen his name in headlines in *The Sun* as often this summer as in a typical full year or more in his previous quarter-century as a senator.

The same ratio in national publications has been even more notable. The so-called "stealth senator," who seldom sought publicity, has even showed up on all the Sunday morning talk and interview shows.

Of course, the reason for this attention is that after years of playing second fiddle to more senior Democrats or, more recently, to Republicans, on his committees, Sarbanes now is Mr. Chairman, the leader of the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee.

His publicity goes beyond just being chairman. He crafted reform legislation dealing with the corporate scandals and resultant crisis so well that even those who opposed it at the start rushed to support it in the end. He might have been able to pull this off if he were just the ranking minority party member of the committee instead of chairman. But that is doubtful. For all its modernity, the Senate is still committee-driven in crucial moments, and committee members still almost always follow their leader, who is almost always the senior majority party member on the committee.

Maryland has a history of turning out its senators after one or two six-year terms. So,



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After years out of the spotlight, Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes took to television to push for increased regulation of accounting firms.

the state hasn't had many chairmen of major standing committees. Before Sarbanes, only Millard E. Tydings (Armed Services, 1949-1951) and Charles McC. Mathias (Rules and Administration, 1981-1987) had attained that status and influence in the years since popular election of senators began in 1914.

Rules is not a powerful committee. Mathias almost became chairman of the very influential Judiciary Committee in 1981. He was second in seniority to Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, who was also senior on Armed Services, a more influential committee, which was Thurmond's apparent preference under the one-major-chairmanship rule. But conservatives prevailed on Thurmond to take Judiciary to block the liberal Mathias.

Armed Services was not the only "committee" Millard Tydings headed. He also chaired a special subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee which was informally known in the press and in the Senate as [See Sarbanes, 6F]



SUN STAFF : 2000

Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski is likely to lead a committee after 2004.



SUN STAFF : 1996

Charles McC. Mathias led the Rules and Administration panel.

Democra strength

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Democrats retain strength in Senate

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and right-wing Republicans took on Tydings in his 1950 race for re-election to a fifth term, and they beat him.

Tydings was the only Maryland senator to have served four terms before Sarbanes, who was elected to a fifth term in 2000. Mathias is the only other Maryland senator to have served three terms. Barbara A. Mikulski is in the last two years of her third term.

Before 1914, senators were chosen by state legislatures. Since then, Maryland voters have elected nine men who served only one term or less, and four who served only two terms.

Mikulski seems likely to be re-elected to a fourth term in 2004, and soon thereafter chair a standing committee. If that happens, Maryland will finally have what the Deep South states learned long ago and exploited so well for decades: Send Democratic senators to Washington to stay and thus get to be senior, with the chairmanships and other perks and power that go with it.

Mikulski and Sarbanes, like Tydings before them, are Democrats. Mathias was a Republican. Regional Democrats dominate the Senate now, but they don't whistle "Dixie." Their region is that liberal alliance of Eastern and Middle Western states that almost elected Al Gore president in 2000.

Eleven of the 16 chairmen of standing Senate committees are from states that voted for Gore. Thirteen of the ranking Republicans on those committees, who would be chairmen if their party controlled the Senate, are from states that voted for George W. Bush. It is a certainty that if Phil Gramm of Texas were still the chairman of the Banking Committee, the legislation that the Senate forced the House of Representatives and Bush to accept with gritted teeth — the bill Sarbanes is responsible for — would have been quite different.

Gramm vigorously but unsuccessfully opposed the bill's central provisions imposing strict guidelines on accounting firms and creating an oversight board with teeth, first in the Banking Committee and then in the House-Senate conference committee.

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Speaking of Gramm, the Texan is one of five Republican senators from a state of the Old Confederacy who would be committee chairmen if they were in the majority. Only one Democratic chairman, Ernest F. Hollings of South Carolina, is a son of the South.

Most of the states that voted for Gore for president in 2000 and now provide those 11 Senate committee chairmen are states that have been falling behind the rest of the nation in population growth, especially falling behind the Sun Belt states, the "Bush states." The "Gore states" are thus losing influence in the House of Representatives and in the Electoral College.

Of course, in this Congress, the Democrats control the Senate by only one vote, supplied by an Independent, former Republican James M. Jeffords of Vermont. But Democratic control of the Senate is likely to continue in 2003-2004. The Democrats have fewer of their senators up for re-election this November than Republicans do. The Republican Party is getting the elephant's share of the blame for the lagging economy.

That those Gore states at the same time are losing political influence in the House of Representatives and White House because of population loss yet gaining influence in the Senate at the expense of the fast-growing South (and West) would seem an ironic turn in the road of American history.

But it isn't. The Senate was always meant to be a forum of the states, unrelated to wealth or population. It used to be said that the Senate had become "the South's revenge for Appomattox." In this Congress and probably in the next it could well prove to be "the North's revenge for — Florida."

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