

GOP senators no closer to picking leader

■ Harris and Brinkley
offer different styles
for shaping the opposition
the next four years

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ANNAPOLIS — Forget losing the governorship.

Republican lawmakers are having a hard time agreeing on who should be the party's flag-bearer in the legislature. And the issue comes down to leadership styles.

After spending nine hours in their fourth-floor caucus room on Tuesday, GOP senators emerged no closer to electing a leader than they were when they walked in. They won't vote again until next week or later.

The stalemate — and a similar quarrel in the House — has prompted questions about whether the GOP caucus is fractured or just a little sore.

The two senators who want to be minority leader offer colleagues divergent approaches: Minority Whip Andrew P. Harris (R-Dist. 7) of Cockeysville is a strident conservative who will bird-dog the Democratic majority, while Sen. David R. Brinkley (R-Dist. 4) of Frederick is considered a moderate consensus-builder more likely to work with Democrats to pass GOP-backed legislation.

Brinkley said the differences between him and Harris are not ideological, but are "in style and how that message is communicated" — a point Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. emphasized to House Republicans on Tuesday.

"There are two models. One choice is acquiescence, a 'go along to get along' model, and the other is loyal opposition, 'we believe in what we believe in,'" Ehrlich (R) said after meeting with the House caucus. "I hope they choose option B. I do believe competition in the marketplace of ideas is good for the state."

Republican leaders must strike a difficult balance between loyal opposition

and collaborative partnership, said Transportation Secretary Robert L. Flanagan, a Howard County delegate who was minority whip from 1997 to 2001.

"You have to pick and choose those issues where there truly is a difference and figure out how to highlight those differences," he said. "At the same time, you don't simply want to be oppositional for the sake of opposing."

And it's important that the caucus emerges from the leadership votes unified, several former lawmakers said.

"It's a typical sibling rivalry," said former delegate Richard A. LaVay, who was minority whip from 1995 to 1996. "Brothers and sisters can battle, but they still have the interest of the family at heart."

There's room for sticking to party principles, but being cooperative is more effective at the end of the day, he advised. "We tried to keep throwing bombs to a minimum because they were counterproductive. The leader that is a bridge-burner, I wouldn't support."

Deadlocked

By the time they gave up Tuesday, senators had cast at least 15 ballots, each resulting in a 7-7 tie. Alexander X. Mooney (R-Dist. 3) of Urbana was vacationing in the U.S. Virgin Islands and voted by proxy.

"We're discussing a lot of things. We all get along real well together and we're having some fun talking," said Sen. Allan H. Kittleman, who was elected party whip over Sen. Nancy Jacobs (R-Dist. 34) of Abingdon.

Like a hung jury intent on reaching consensus, the caucus dug in for a lengthy discussion. The tipoff came three hours into the meeting when Kittleman (R-Dist. 9) of West Friendship retrieved a case of diet soda from

his office. Pizza came later.

Before the caucus reconvenes Dec. 14 or Dec. 18, the senators have to weigh what role the GOP will play during the O'Malley administration.

"It's great to have a nine-hour discussion, and now you have a few days of reflection and that's beneficial for all,"

Brinkley said.

The GOP can be effective in the legislature, Brinkley said, because Democrats have wider philosophical differences. In some cases, conservative Democrats have viewpoints closer to Republicans than to progressive Democrats.

"The Democratic Party has divisions in it, too," Brinkley said. "In fact, if anything, they are more apparent. And therefore, a unified block of 14 can hold tremendous sway when a large majority like that is fractured. The Republican caucus and one-third of the Democratic caucus can stop legislation."

Saving the party?

In the House, Minority Whip Anthony J. O'Donnell is vying with Del. Wade A. Kach to succeed George C. Edwards as minority leader. Edwards (R-Dist. 1A) of Grantsville moves to the Senate next month.

Both O'Donnell and Kach (D-Dist. 5B) of Cockeysville said the governor's advice jibed with their respective approaches.

But, given Ehrlich's comments Tuesday, the momentum seems to be with O'Donnell, who has repeatedly butted heads with Democrats over the past four years.

"We have to be strong in our resolve, clear in our message, but certainly not co-opted for some small favor from the majority," said O'Donnell (R-Dist. 29C) of Lusby. "That's not why we're sent here."

The 37-member caucus will elect its leaders on Dec. 19. O'Donnell is running with Del. Christopher B. Shank (R-Dist. 2B) of Hagerstown, while Kach has teamed up with Del. Michael D. Smigiel Sr. (R-Dist. 36) of Elkton.

Former delegate Carmen M. Amedori, a Republican from Westminster, acknowledges the philosophical divide.

"[O'Donnell] can be diplomatic, but he can also be abrasive," she said. "On the other hand, you have Wade, who can be diplomatic and squishy, and I don't think this is a time to get squishy."

With Ehrlich losing his bid for reelection, legislative leaders become the face of the party and will determine whether the GOP can rebound in 2010.

"There's no backup there for four years," Ehrlich said.