

Sauerbrey Narrows Gap in Md. GOP Governor's Race

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By Amy Goldstein and Richard Tapscott
Washington Post Staff Writers

House of Delegates Minority Leader Ellen R. Sauerbrey has surged in public opinion polls on the Maryland Republican governor's race, but it remains uncertain whether her campaign has enough money or popularity to overtake the front-runner, Rep. Helen Delich Bentley, in the 12 days before the primary.

The gains by Sauerbrey, a former Baltimore County teacher who is among the General Assembly's most solid conservatives, increases the tension in a primary campaign that already represents the GOP's most visible and powerful challenge to the governor's office in years. Marylanders have not picked a Republican governor since electing Spiro T. Agnew in 1966.

In recent weeks, Sauerbrey has doubled her support to 27 points, slicing her gap in half and pulling to within 17 points of Bentley, according to a poll released Monday.

The tightening race is the fruit of Sauerbrey's clear theme of lower taxes and smaller government, her biting attacks on Bentley and a well-organized grass-roots strategy assembled over 15 months, according to Sauerbrey's campaign and independent political analysts.

Sauerbrey said the poll results indicate that her name and budget-cutting message are being embraced, even though she has lacked the money for an intensive mass media campaign. "The majority of people early on responded to poll questions based entirely on name recognition," she said. "There is no doubt Helen had a great advantage."

Sauerbrey is trying to position herself as Maryland's version of New Jersey Gov. Christine Todd Whitman—a politician she invokes frequently—a Republican who defeated Gov. Jim Florio last November, then fulfilled a campaign promise to cut taxes.

During eight years as leader of the Republican minority in the House of Delegates, Sauerbrey has been an increasingly strident opponent of the budget policies of Gov. William Donald Schaefer, although she has never mustered enough votes to block Democratic spending plans.

She has proposed a 24 percent cut in personal income taxes over the next four years, and said this week that if elected she would return her first year's salary of \$120,000 if she

reneges on that promise. She has targeted several agencies for cuts but has not said how she would achieve the savings.

Sauerbrey considers a better business climate and more jobs the solution to many social ills, ranging from child abuse to the fragmentation of families to dependency on welfare.

"Sauerbrey has a clear, consistent conservative message," said Keven Igoe, a former executive director of the Maryland Republican Party who now works as a consultant to GOP candidates in the state. And as one of the earliest candidates to join the governor's race, "she's been driving home her message for so long, she is starting to benefit," Igoe said.

Sauerbrey's recent gains, though, may say as much about Bentley's strategy as Sauerbrey's. Better known and better financed, the U.S. representative from Baltimore County has made relatively few primary campaign appearances. When Sauerbrey has railed at Bentley's record, the typically feisty Bentley has refused to fight back.

"It has been almost a stealth campaign," said J. Brad Coker, president of Mason-Dixon Political/Media Research Inc., which conducted the independent poll late last week.

But as the Sept. 13 primary draws closer, Bentley has elevated her profile. The two candidates appeared last night at a debate in Bethesda among the Republican gubernatorial candidates, including William S. Shepard, the former diplomat from Montgomery County who appears to be running a distant third.

Despite her rise in the recent poll, Sauerbrey may not be well-positioned to exploit the apparent momentum.

For one thing, it is unclear exactly how much ground she has gained. With only 228 Republicans interviewed in the poll, its margin of error is nearly 7 percentage points. That means that the numbers could be as close as 37 percent for Bentley and 34 percent for Sauerbrey, or as far apart as 51 percent for Bentley and 20 percent for Sauerbrey.

In addition, analysts said, many of the undecided Republican voters are in the voter-rich Washington suburbs, where neither woman is particularly well-known, especially in upper Montgomery County.

Bentley could have an advantage in picking up such voters, because her running mate, state Sen. Howard A. Denis, is from Montgomery, and she is supported by Rep. Constance A. Morella, who represents most of the county in Congress.

With the campaign in its frenetic last two weeks, Bentley also has more than twice as much money at her disposal as Sauerbrey, according to their most recent finance reports.

The representative expected to get an additional \$100,000 this week from fund-raising events at which former vice president Dan Quayle was the featured guest, although Quayle also said this week that he supported the tax cut Sauerbrey has proposed.

Bentley, who so far has avoided expensive broadcast ads, is planning a television blitz after Labor Day. Her aides said they were intensifying her media campaign, less out of concern for Sauerbrey's gains, than because Democratic front-runner Parris N. Glendening has been spending heavily on television and has pulled into a statistically significant lead in a head-to-head match against Bentley in the general election, according to the new poll.

Sauerbrey aides said they plan to spend more than \$50,000 before the primary on a new radio advertisement. Scheduled to air on 33 stations statewide, it stresses her proposals on taxes and crime.

She also will spend nearly \$50,000 on cable and network-affiliated television stations in the Washington suburbs and Baltimore.