‘Invisible’ Sarbanes Called Unbeatable in Senate Race

Md. Democrat Studiously Avoids Limelight

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Sarbanes, 55, a serious-minded New Deal Democrat, has spent much of his career as a paradox in modern-day politics. And now, as he seeks his party’s nomination to a third term in the March 8 Maryland primary, he seems to have no intention of changing his unorthodox ways.

Time and again he has been thrust to the center of major national dramas, including the House Watergate impeachment proceedings, the Panama Canal treaty debate and last year’s Iran-contra hearings.

Yet Sarbanes generally has shunned Washington’s limelight and political fast track in favor of an insider’s role that has made him less visible than the other two leading Democrats in the state, freshman Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski and Gov. William Donald Schaefer.

Even on his home turf, the cautious, cerebral Sarbanes occasionally seems indifferent to public attention.

In October, Sarbanes arranged a breakfast meeting on the Eastern Shore with Rep. Roy P. Dyson (D-

Md.), the mayor of Salisbury and other prominent area officials to lay groundwork for his 1988 reelection campaign. The event drew a strong turnout, but because of halfhearted advance work only one local reporter attended.

“He was making a tour of the Eastern Shore but he didn’t tell anybody,” said one baffled official.

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Sarbanes Seen as Unbeatable

Karl A. Lamb, the academic dean at the Naval Academy who attended Oxford with Sarbanes, recalled that Sarbanes always demonstrated extreme self-confidence and a "judicial temperament" thatmitigated against snap decisions.

"The first thing you sense about Paul is that he knows what he's doing," Lamb said. "There was never a question about him searching for an identity. A Gary Hart he isn't."


"That such a low-profile politician is virtually assured reelection this year is explained in part by Maryland politics. With Democrats outnumbering Republicans by more than 2 to 1 statewide, Sarbanes is virtually invincible. Although he is probably more liberal than his state-Sarbanes has the most liberal voting record of any member of the Senate, according to a Congressional Quarterly analysis of 1987 votes-his ideology has given him broad-based support among traditional Maryland voters, a strong base among trade unionists, rank-and-file Democrats and the Jewish community.

Heavily Democratic Baltimore constitutes his power base, although he swept every county in the conservativenorthern suburbs, has a substantial following in Washington's affluent suburbs. Conservatives have contributed heavily to his campaigns-accounting for nearly one-third of all reported individual contributions to his reelection campaign this year. Sarbanes is of Greek descent.

"First and foremost, he is very much in tune, substantively and philosophically, with the Democratic Party and Maryland in general," said Keith Haller, a Maryland political consultant based in Montgomery County. "He's more a symbol of a whole generation-
his admirer is his extraordinary, almost cuntish, style of campaigning, which he has kept Sarbanes back in the pack on some issues."

Sarbanes is by nature a political pragmatist, not a politician by the book, those who know him well say. Both respect and admire him, though some don't see him involved in things, and yet you never underestimate him.

Thomas E. Mann, director of governmental studies at the Brookings Institution, said that Sarbanes' self-effacing style is refreshing and healthy, but he warned that it has a downside.

"Sometimes it looks like he's not engaged, he's indecisive, at times, and so on," Mann said. "But I just take him as a kind of a quiet man. Those who know him well both respect and admire him, even though they don't see him involved in things, and yet you never underestimate him."

Sarbanes is annoyed by media portrayals of him as a "proposition politician." A recent Baltimore Sun series described him as described as a "man who is devoted to his family and his work, not to the need for a positive image in politics, but to the job that he was sent to do."

Sarbanes said recently, "He has a cool judgment in which I put a great deal of trust."

Sarbanes would receive intense pressure from his supporters in the Greek community to back Dukakis. A week before the recent Iowa caucuses, Sarbanes dropped his neutral stance and flew to Des Moines to endorse Dukakis.

Last year, he said that he had not been pressured, noting that he did not deviate from his decision until he had completed his work on the Iran-Contra committee.

On Capitol Hill, where self-promotion is an art form, Sarbanes' office issues press releases regularly and often. He has sent out a newsletter-a popular campaign device-since 1985, when Sarbanes returned from a meeting in Moscow with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.

"He really doesn't do the art of self-promotion," said Christine Sarbanes, the senator's British-born wife. "I think he's always felt that you shouldn't have to promote yourself-that if you're doing the job right others will perceive it.

Sarbanes rarely introduces legislation, arguing that most bills never see the light of day and that he is better off not trying to amend others' legislation. During his second term, Sarbanes has introduced 17 bills, only one of which has become law. The Baltimore Sun reported that Sarbanes introduced the bill to designate the Baltimore-Washington Parkway after former representative Gladys Noon Spellman was approved.

At the same time, he sponsored eight amendments that were approved, including a neighborhood reinvestment measure, a rider to the 1989 antipoverty act, an increase in air service between the United States and South Africa, and an amendment requiring a noise abatement study at Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

While critics wonder what Sarbanes has accomplished, his peers in the Senate generally admire him and view him as effective.

Sarbanes, the third-ranking Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee, also serves on the banking, housing and urban affairs committee and is chairman of the Joint Economic Committee.

His influence stems in part from a close relationship with Senate Majority Leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), who seeks Sarbanes' advice. As a participant in the Democrats' legislative strategy, Sarbanes has helped to shape policy on Social Security, tax reform, aid to the Nicaraguan rebels and campaigns against conservatives that led to his resignation. He was fired for a high-ranking attack from the National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPC) to win re-election in 1982. Last year, he served on the select committee investigating the Iran-Contra affair.

"In a way, he's never had to go out looking for causes," Christine Sarbanes said. "They've always come to him."