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A familiar name, unknown quantity

■ **Senator: Maryland voters have kept Paul S. Sarbanes in Congress the past 28 years, but few can say what he has been doing there.**

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SUN NATIONAL STAFF

When Paul S. Sarbanes said last month that he intends to run for re-election, state Democratic Chairman Peter B. Krauser rejoiced, calling the state's senior senator "an icon in Maryland politics."

Asked how he would characterize Sarbanes' accomplishments, however, Krauser responded: "Can I get back to you on that? I'm not that familiar with the senator's record."

Krauser has company.

After more than 28 years in Congress, including 22 in the Senate, Sarbanes remains an enigma to much of a state that has given him one resounding electoral victory after another. For many Marylanders, it is as though the liberal Democrat's record has been written in wet sand on the beach, ready to be washed away with the next high tide.

"It's a well-known name around here, but I really don't know much about his politics," said Republican Sharon Schilling, 45, the owner of a goldsmith's shop in downtown Salisbury, a few blocks from the site where Sarbanes once waited on tables at the family diner.

While many people in the Eastern Shore hub recall the rise by this son of Greek immigrants to the heights of power in Washington, they have a hard time remember-

ing just what Sarbanes has done with that influence during the past three decades.

With Sarbanes preparing for an election that would make him the longest-serving senator in Maryland history, *The Sun* interviewed scores of Maryland voters from all walks of life and all corners of the state, as well as an assortment of activists and political figures.

Few voters recalled Sarbanes' starring role in Watergate, where, as a young House Democrat prized for his judiciousness, he wrote the crucial first article of impeachment against President Richard M. Nixon. Fewer still could identify a single issue on which Sarbanes had been a leader. [See Sarbanes, 5A]



KARL M. FERRON : SUN STAFF

Senior lawmaker: Paul S. Sarbanes, first elected to the Senate in 1976, has announced he will run for a fifth term.

Sarbanes an unknown quantity

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"Though I've admired the way he's voted on things, I don't really see him as being a leader on any of those things," said Democrat Roy Knight, 75, a retired Baltimore educator. "I haven't made up my mind about what legacy he'll leave."

Also typical was the response of Republican Bob DeLeon, 26, an accountant from Columbia: "Wasn't he once a governor? I probably voted for him in the last election because I recognized his name, but I can't tell you too much about him." (Sarbanes, 66, has been a Rhodes Scholar, a lawyer, a state legislator and congressman, but never a governor.)

Sarbanes agreed to be interviewed for this story, but later changed his mind. His spokesman, Jesse Jacobs, issued this written statement: "At each election, the senator comes before the people of the state of Maryland, presents his record, and they respond accordingly."

The Marylanders who were unable to cite Sarbanes' accomplishments are not utterly disconnected from the world of politics. Many could easily recite the initiatives

or favorite causes of Maryland's junior senator, Barbara A. Mikulski, or their representative in the House. Many — though not all — of them had favorable things to say about Sarbanes, calling him principled, decent and honest. But most could not say what he has done in Washington.

Said Larry Kursch, a Salisbury Democrat, "I know my father voted for him a lot of times, and that I probably did also. I know he's had a distinguished career in Congress, and that he's been involved in a lot of committee work there."

"But," added the 48-year-old record store manager, "he doesn't stand out to me."

Why no leadership?

Stephen Hess, a scholar at the Brookings Institution, argued that there's little substance to be found in Sarbanes' record beyond a reliably liberal Democratic voice. "He's no dummy. So why isn't there more?" Hess asked. "There are only a hundred of them [in the Senate]. We should expect a certain sort of leadership from him."

But some longtime students of politics have a different view, arguing that different roles fit different senators: Some craft high-profile legislation, others champion concerns in hearings or quietly serve as an intellectual resource for colleagues.

"There are people who are simply prized for their wisdom," said Rutgers University political scientist Ross K. Baker. "For that, I wouldn't go any further than Paul Sarbanes."

On Capitol Hill, Sarbanes is known best for a handful of narrowly defined issues for which he fights fiercely. A frequent recipient of campaign contributions from Greek-American donors, he has played a vocal role in Greek-Turkish tensions over Cyprus and other issues.

And as the senior Democrat on the Senate Banking Committee, he has consistently, if unsuccessfully, goaded Federal Reserve Board Chairman Alan Greenspan to lower interest rates. Such a policy could spur banks to make more loans, providing more money for investment and, potentially, more jobs.

At a time of low inflation and high employment, even many Democrats question the wisdom of that Sarbanes crusade. "That's been his focus over the last couple of years, although I'm not sure it's one that I entirely agree with," said former Sarbanes campaign worker Kevin B. Kamenetz, a Democrat who is now chairman of the Baltimore County Council.

Sarbanes' deliberative style during committee hearings cloaks

a highly partisan streak that almost invariably produces party-line Democratic votes. He has enthusiastically backed labor unions and federal employees, and he had significant roles in congressional inquiries on the Iran-Contra and Whitewater scandals.

But he has not been the chief advocate on the kind of high-impact issue that leaves a lasting impression on voters.

In contrast, retiring New Jersey Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg, a Democrat relatively unknown outside his state, was widely lauded in New Jersey for his efforts over 16 years to ban offshore dumping of toxic waste, to bar smoking on domestic flights, and to force states to raise the minimum age for consumption of alcohol.

And Sen. John H. Chafee, a moderate Rhode Island Republican who entered the Senate with Sarbanes in 1977, is also a largely unfamiliar face outside Washington or his state — but he is considered a major figure in environmental and health-care issues. Sarbanes cannot make a similar claim.

In describing Sarbanes, Alex Doyle, past president of the Maryland Manufacturers' Association, pointed to the derisive tag that has stuck to Sarbanes for years: stealth senator. About the only achievement Doyle could cite was Sarbanes' work, behind the scenes, to persuade a military contractor to move to Maryland.

Behind-the-scenes style

His defenders maintain that Sarbanes prefers to get things done behind closed doors. Last year, for example, he worked with Republican Sen. Connie Mack of Florida to dilute House GOP proposals for new requirements that public housing residents would have to fulfill to keep their leases.

Krauser, the state Democratic chairman who drew a blank on Sarbanes' record in February, said last week in a telephone interview that he had done some research on the senator.

"Obviously, I've taken the time to become a little more familiar

with his record. He has brought an unparalleled amount of federal resources for mass transit in Maryland," Krauser said. "He has led the fight to protect the environment on the Eastern Shore and the Chesapeake Bay."

Reading from notes, Krauser rattled off a list of issues on which he said Sarbanes had been a leader, including opposition to cheap steel imports, curbing water pollution and promoting reef restoration. Krauser concluded, "He reminds us all that politics can still be a profession for honorable men."

During President Clinton's impeachment trial, Sarbanes had a much lower profile than he did as a junior House member during the Nixon impeachment. As the Senate was trying Clinton, Sarbanes was a behind-the-scenes adviser on trial procedures but rarely spoke publicly. Other Senate Democrats, such as West Virginia's Robert C. Byrd and Dianne Feinstein of California, commanded more influence.

"I've never characterized Paul Sarbanes as one who was out front on issues," said Kamenetz, his former campaign aide. "I've always relied upon him to be working behind the scenes to amend other people's bills, and to formulate better policies in those bills."

Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin, a Baltimore-area Democrat, said Sarbanes has served as a conscience of the Senate. "Paul has a long list of accomplishments, but unlike other members of Congress, he doesn't promote them," Cardin said. "You've got to really work hard and research to learn where he is often successful."

Jack Meltzer, a 77-year-old Democrat from Montgomery County, said Sarbanes' integrity represented a model for other politicians, but questioned why he had not taken more of a leading role in the Senate.

"He's got the smarts to do more if he had the ambition, but that's not his personality," said Meltzer, a retired urban planner. "Apparently, his greatest ambition is to move from the House to the Senate, and he achieved that."