

MARYLAND POLITICS: For Two Key Senate Chairmen, Challenges on the Home Front

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For Two Key Senate Chairmen, Challenges on the Home Front

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The Washington suburbs boast two of the four key committee chairmen in the Maryland Senate, and both senators face unusually tough reelection campaigns this fall.

Some lawmakers say the suburbs will lose substantial political clout if voters oust the chairmen, who strongly influence legislation under the Senate's tradition of

concentrated leadership. But opponents say the two veteran Democratic senators, Thomas P. O'Reilly and Laurence Levitan, may be falling out of step with their changing districts, in part because their leadership roles often force them to focus more on statewide concerns than on local matters.

In a Prince George's district that includes Riverdale and Cheverly, O'Reilly faces a primary challenge from Del. Paul G. Pinsky. As chairman of the Finance Committee, which handles legislation on

banking, insurance and other matters, O'Reilly has been prominent in high-profile battles such as last year's revision of Maryland's health care regulations.

A personal-injury lawyer known for his TV commercials and snow-white hair, O'Reilly, 55, is able to raise substantial campaign money from medical associations and other groups that have legislation before his panel. He had no Democratic challenger in 1986 or 1990, and he crushed his little-known GOP opponents. Unlike Pinsky, he is closely allied with Senate

President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Prince George's).

Pinsky, a past president of the county teachers union, said his record of supporting gun control, abortion rights, environmental issues and increased school funding puts him more in line with the district's priorities than O'Reilly. "Having people in power is nice," Pinsky said of O'Reilly's committee position. "But if they're voting the wrong way, it doesn't help."

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Seats of Power May Not Be Secure

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O'Reilly said he has kept in close contact with constituents, who understand his opposition to abortion, waiting periods for handgun purchases and school funding plans that he says focus too much on teacher salaries. O'Reilly said his record shows "political courage. Paul Pinsky takes the road of least resistance and votes with special-interest groups time after time."

Pinsky, 43, finished second among the three delegates elected in the 22nd District in 1990. Neither he nor the first-place finisher, Del. Richard A. Palumbo (D), were backed by O'Reilly. Under Maryland's new legislative districts, Pinsky now lives in a majority black, single-member House district that comprises one-third of O'Reilly's Senate district. Pinsky and O'Reilly are white.

Meanwhile, Levitan (D-Montgomery), who chairs the Senate Budget and Taxation Committee, may escape a primary challenge but could face Republican Del. Jean W. Roesser in the November general election. As committee chairman, Levitan often has defended tax increases and budget allocations that reflected statewide compromises with Baltimore and other power centers.

Levitan, 60, said he has battled hard for Montgomery County's interests, and he is playing a leading role this year in opposing a state-funded football stadium for Baltimore. Teachers and abortion rights advocates, among others, will work for his campaign, he said.

Roesser, 63, is known for attending numerous public and private events in her Potomac-based district, the most Republican-leaning section of Montgomery. She said she will hammer away at

Levitan's past support of tax increases.

The Steinberg Show

Lt. Gov. Melvin A. Steinberg is well on his way to becoming the Prince of Backdrops.

When he announced his candidacy for governor in December, the Democrat chose a site in West Baltimore near the street corner where his uncle was killed in a robbery 25 years ago. The point was to emphasize his anti-crime plan.

On Monday, Steinberg stood in front of cemeteries in Baltimore and Silver Spring to underscore the death toll he said is attributable to cigarette smoking. And, by the way, he was urging a \$2-a-pack tax on cigarettes.

No matter that he made the same proposal in a January news release. This time he provided the visuals.

New Executive Directors

As more attention turns to the fall elections, both the Democratic and Republican parties have new executive directors in their state headquarters.

Lance Copsey, 24, was named to the top staff post with the state GOP after three years in a variety of capacities, including assistant to the director and communications director.

On the Democratic side, Shannon Mouton, 26, became executive director after a stint as director of development and fund-raising. She also spent six months with the Democratic National Committee before moving to the Maryland party office.

Staff writer Richard Tapscott contributed to this report.