

How Franchot pulled it off

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by Thomas Dennison
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ANNAPOLIS — Peter Franchot's upset victory and incumbent William Donald Schaefer's stunning defeat in this week's Democratic primary for comptroller shocked casual political observers and State House veterans.

While the outcome caught many off guard, Franchot's victory, Schaefer's third-place finish and Janet S. Owens falling in the middle reflected the stark contrasts in the strategy, planning and execution of their campaigns.

Franchot, a Takoma Park delegate, was businesslike in mobilizing his base, energizing liberal interest groups and painting his two opponents as out of touch with core Democratic values. He won the endorsements of The Washington Post and (Baltimore) Sun, organized labor and environmentalists. And his mantra that Owens and Schaefer were "pro-slots, pro-sprawl and pro-Bob Ehrlich" struck a chord with voters in the Washington suburbs.

Franchot only won four counties (Montgomery, Prince George's, Charles and Frederick), but his vote totals show that his strategy of running up big numbers in his base worked. Statewide, he received more than 190,000 votes, with a stunning 110,000 coming from the four counties he won. In Montgomery County alone, Franchot beat Owens by more than 36,000 votes, according to unofficial tallies.

"Franchot ran a textbook campaign on how to win a Democratic primary," said pollster G. Keith Haller, president of Bethesda's Potomac Inc. "He was focused like a hawk, and he had the organizational underpinnings to mobilize the liberal wing of the party at just the right time. He understood what it took to win."

Franchot faces Anne M. McCarthy, former dean of the Merrick School of Business at the University of Baltimore and political newcomer, in November.

As Franchot was locking down late endorsements and putting together a game-day strategy for Tuesday, Owens and Schaefer spent the past two weeks embroiled in name-calling that may have done more to hurt than help them.

Owens, the term-limited Anne Arundel county executive considered the favorite by many analysts and elected officials, paused for a moment when asked Wednesday about Franchot's late surge. The "constant negative comments" in the final week, when the media chronicled Schaefer calling her "Mother Hubbard" and "fat," helped Franchot, she said.

Owens was accused by Schaefer, 84, of engaging in age discrimination for the theme of her campaign, "It's Time."

As for Franchot, Owens said she is a good Democrat and will support the Democratic ticket in November, but stopped short of endorsing Franchot, saying she wanted to have a discussion with him first.

Schaefer's political machine — once viewed as the most potent in the state — proved to be lethargic and beset by conflicting points of view and overall dysfunction.

"In many respects we probably should have been more aggressive and bolder and recognized the challenge a lot earlier," said Nelson Sabatini, Schaefer's former health secretary and a longtime political ally. "A lot of us felt that he would have 40 percent of the voters go for him no matter what."

An example of the dysfunction happened in the final weeks of the campaign when Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) was prepared to do a radio

spot in the Washington suburbs for Schaefer. The campaign never worked out the logistics, sources said, and the spot was never cut.

There was also second-guessing of the campaign's decision to put Schaefer in front of reporters and cameras — particularly the event in Lexington Market last week — where he continued his personal riffs on Owens, who was once close to Schaefer.

There was disagreement among Schaefer loyalists over whether the comptroller should have made radio ad where he apologized for his inflammatory remarks about women, immigrants and others. "The campaign was breathtakingly out of its league," said one longtime Schaefer adviser.

Interviews with several of Schaefer's advisers revealed the backbiting and finger-pointing that was happening before and after the primary. Some in the campaign quit out of disgust, and others complained about the rivalry between those who support Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. (R) and those aligned with Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley.

Lainy Lebow-Sachs, Schaefer's closest political and personal confidant, said she was aware of the tensions, but said what happened was typical of any tough re-election campaign. Nor is Schaefer a typical politician who could be scripted to stay on message, she said.

"When you have a campaign, you're always going to have people saying this and that ... there's always tensions in a campaign when you're fighting a very big battle," Lebow-Sachs said. She downplayed the reports of dysfunction or the notion that there were rivalries among Schaefer's supporters. "We knew everything that was going on," she said.

Bruce C. Bereano, a veteran Annapolis lobbyist who has worked on Schaefer campaigns for years, had a different assessment.

"With all due respect, this re-election effort was not as organized and smooth-running as previous election campaigns that I have been involved in concerning Governor Schaefer's political career," Bereano said, refusing to blame anyone individually. "Regretfully, there were a lot of missed opportunities and some of the key people who had control and were working the campaign had a agendas other than William Donald Schaefer."

The Owens campaign, meanwhile, got off to a late start, and she was unable to secure enough of the Democratic base that had already committed to Franchot. She positioned herself in the middle — a moderate alternative to Franchot's liberal views and a more stable alternative to Schaefer.

"The old saying in politics is when you run down the middle of the road, you become road kill," said one Democratic operative.

Franchot's win is the product of several years of methodical preparation to run for statewide office. In August 2003, Franchot, a virtual unknown beyond his liberal Takoma Park district in Montgomery County, traveled to western Charles County for a picnic with Democrats. He began signaling soon that he was going to run statewide. He gave a series of red-meat Democratic speeches on the Eastern Shore and to any Democratic club around the state that invited him to speak.

Franchot also distanced himself from others in the Democratic Party who moved closer to the middle following the 2002 election of Ehrlich. He proudly called himself a liberal and organized two "Progressive Summits," which gave voice to party activists upset with Republicans and the status quo in the Democratic Party.

"We turned the page on one chapter in Maryland political history and are turning the page to a new progressive one," Franchot said at his victory news conference in Takoma Park on Wednesday.

Republicans are already eagerly looking forward to exploit Franchot's liberal label and his 20 years in the House of Delegates.

"Peter Franchot has a long voting history, and I can tell you it's a target-rich environment for us," said House Minority Whip Anthony J. O'Donnell (R-Dist. 29C) of Lusby.

Staff Writer Margie Hyslop contributed to this report.

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