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From the Baltimore Sun

Maryland votes 2006

Attack ads turn off undecided voters

By Andrew A. Green
Sun reporter

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Megan Hardy, an education major at [Towson University](#), has taken her time to figure out who should get her very first vote for governor this fall.

She has thought about the issues and talked to her friends, but one thing she hasn't done to make up her mind is pay the slightest bit of attention to the millions of dollars' worth of TV ads that Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. and Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley are using to pump up their accomplishments and blame their opponents for all that's ill in the world.

"It's just general smear campaign stuff," said Hardy, 21, of Aberdeen. "I've already seen stuff that I know is twisted around."

Gubernatorial campaigns are rarely genteel affairs, but most of those watching the Ehrlich-O'Malley race expect it to be particularly brutal.

The stakes are high, with the governor's Republican Party trying to expand its toehold in usually Democratic Maryland. And the two candidates, who are known to personally dislike one another, have been sniping back and forth for years.

A retiree at an AARP forum last week stood up to chastise both candidates for the negative tone of the campaign, but the governor said voters are going to have to get used to it.

"Elections are about contrast," Ehrlich said. "And ... we don't agree on anything."

Ehrlich went negative with a television ad in July, and O'Malley followed suit two weeks later. With money flowing into the race at a record pace, the attacks are likely only to intensify.

To gauge the impact of the aggressive campaigning, The Sun contacted more than two dozen respondents to the paper's most recent poll who said at the time (early July, just as campaign advertising began) that they were undecided in the race.

Despite the millions that both campaigns have spent on ads, most of those interviewed said they haven't decided on how to vote. Some have made up their minds since (including Hardy, who said she plans to vote for O'Malley). But almost universally, they said they don't like the take-no-prisoners politics of this race.

"I'm really turned off by the negative ads," said Jerry Meconi, 60, a retired teacher from Baltimore. "But they're par for the course, and unfortunately, they'll probably get worse."

Academics who study political advertising say that despite many voters' avowed dislike of negative ads, they are standard procedure.

Joel Rivlin, deputy director of the Wisconsin Advertising Project, an effort by the University of Wisconsin that has studied political advertising in every media market in the nation, said campaigns are almost always as negative as they are close.

"You see them most in the most-competitive races," Rivlin said. "Candidates that are miles behind don't bother to run negative ads. Candidates that are miles ahead don't bother to run negative ads."

Maryland voters just witnessed an exception to that rule. U.S. Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin and former congressman Kweisi Mfume just finished a primary battle for the Democratic U.S. Senate nomination in which the two frequently complimented each other on the campaign trail, despite a contest that was decided by just 4 percentage points.

Many in Maryland politics have held that campaign up as an example to be followed, but there's no sign that it will be.

Stanford researchers Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar wrote in their 1996 book *Going Negative* that attack ads can be effective in swaying or demoralizing an opponent's less strongly committed supporters. But that strategy tends to leave out legitimately undecided voters.

"On the one hand, media propaganda can often shore up loyalists to vote for their traditional party; on the other hand, that same propaganda is increasingly peeling off a band of citizens who turn from independence to apathy, even antipathy, toward our political institutions," they wrote.

Jane Lott, 73, a retiree from Baltimore who is a Republican, said she has grown disenchanted with the choices in the governor's race and might not vote at all.

"I just turn all the political ads off," Lott said. "It's just too much, and too many phone calls. I don't remember it ever being so bad."

Part of the reason the undecided voters aren't finding much they like in the campaigns could be that there aren't enough undecided voters to make an appeal to them worthwhile.

In the past two months, every publicly released poll except one shows Ehrlich trailing O'Malley, with the margin ranging from 4 to 13 percentage points. The undecided vote in those surveys is relatively small, ranging from 6 percent to 16 percent.

What Ehrlich needs to do to win, said Thomas F. Schaller, a professor of political science at the [University of Maryland, Baltimore County](#), is to peel away some of the mayor's softer supporters, and the best way to do that is through negative or comparative ads.

"Basically, unless he was ahead going into the late stages, he was going to have to go negative, and that negative attack was going to be generally to frame this as, 'This is the way the city looks, this is the guy who runs the city, do you want the state to look like the city?'" said Schaller, who has advised O'Malley and other Democrats.

Over the past weeks, the Ehrlich campaign has done just that, calling into question O'Malley's record on education by pointing out low test scores at some city schools and criticizing the mayor's resistance to a state effort to force new management of several middle and high schools.

O'Malley has counterattacked recently, airing a television ad criticizing Ehrlich for what he calls insufficient funding of K-12 and postsecondary education.

Thomas Kramer isn't buying it.

"Most of it is, I think, a little exaggerated," said Kramer, an aviation mechanic from Dundalk who voted for Ehrlich in 2002 but has recently started leaning toward O'Malley. "The only thing they're not taking credit for is global warming."

Despite the protests about negative ads, comments from some of the voters interviewed by *The Sun* suggest that the messages are getting through.

Charles Newman, 45, a safety inspector from Westminster, said he thinks both candidates' ads are misleading and full of half-truths. But he said he's now leaning toward Ehrlich, for reasons that could have come straight from the governor's ads: questions about whether O'Malley has really improved Baltimore.

"I guess I base it on past history," Newman said. "You have to look at it from how Mayor O'Malley has run the city."

Lester Ryan, 49, of Brandywine said he's going for O'Malley for a reason straight out of the mayor's attacks on Ehrlich. The governor, Ryan said, has failed to accomplish anything of substance.

"I haven't really seen Ehrlich get anything done that he said he was going to do," said Ryan, who works for ADT Security and said he's angry about Ehrlich's failure to legalize slot machine gambling, among other issues. "He hasn't really done anything."

The back and forth between Ehrlich and O'Malley led some voters to say they might consider supporting Green Party nominee Ed Boyd or Populist Party candidate Christopher A. Driscoll, if just to lodge a protest vote.

Others said they are now nostalgic for the time when there was a third option from the major parties: Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan, who withdrew from the Democratic primary in June.

Before then, Duncan was running a series of ads in which he appeared between cardboard cutouts of Ehrlich and O'Malley, saying that while they were fighting he was off finding solutions to Maryland's problems.

Roslyn Harris-Bowens, a 55-year-old accountant from Baltimore, said she has reservations about both major party candidates.

Neither of them, in her mind, matched up to Duncan.

"I was all for this man Duncan," she said. "He was a different character, and I wanted him. I really enjoyed those ads."

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