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Mikulski Bid for Fifth Term Leaves Md. Dems Staring at Career Ceiling

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WASHINGTON -- When Sen. Barbara Mikulski squelched rumors of her impending retirement by announcing she's ready for a fifth term, she also put a damper on the career aspirations of ambitious Maryland politicians.

"The only people who want Mikulski out more than Republicans are elected Democrats for whom she is posing a logjam in upward mobility," said Don Murphy, a former Maryland delegate and GOP strategist who advises Republican Mikulski challenger Eric Wargotz.

A Mikulski retirement would have shuffled the deck of Maryland politics. A vacant Senate seat would have drawn the attention of a handful of Maryland representatives in the House, and members of the Maryland General Assembly or county officials would have then scrambled to fill any opening in the House, setting off further jockeying for their seats. But that opportune political environment won't materialize this year.

Mikulski announced her campaign staff this week, squashing a frenzy of retirement talk that was originated by a blog rumor.

If re-elected, the 73-year-old would be the longest-serving woman in Senate history. If she completes another full term, her 30 years in office would tie her with former Sen. Paul Sarbanes as the longest-serving senator from Maryland.

Travis Tazelaar, the executive director of the Maryland Democratic Party, said anyone is free to run against Mikulski if they choose, but party members are generally on the same page about her decision to run again.

"From my perspective, the party is united. From the congresspeople all the way down the chain, I have not heard any mumblings or grumblings about the fact that she wants to run for re-election," said Tazelaar, "It wasn't as if somebody's hopes and dreams were dashed because of that."

Both of Maryland's current U.S. senators were elected by seizing the opportunity when incumbents chose to retire. Mikulski won when former Sen. Charles "Mac" Mathias retired in 1987. Sen. Ben Cardin succeeded former Sen. Paul Sarbanes, who retired in 2007. Sarbanes' son, John, D-Towson, then succeeded Cardin in the House.

In lieu of an open Senate seat, it's unlikely that ambitious members of the House would put their careers on the line to challenge a strong incumbent like Mikulski.

"It would be suicide for a Van Hollen or a John Sarbanes," said Blair Lee, a Silver Spring real estate developer and political commentator with a background in campaigns. "When there is a U.S. Senate opening, you're going to see those two young lions go head-to-head."

Van Hollen thought about taking a shot at the Senate in 2006 when Paul Sarbanes was retiring, but higher-ups in the Democratic Party talked him out of running by promising him that there would be future opportunities to move to the upper chamber.

On the House side, no incumbents look to be in for a serious election battle -- whether in a primary or a general election -- except for Rep. Frank Kratovil, who flipped the conservative-leaning 1st District on the Eastern Shore in 2008.

Glenn Ivey, the state's attorney for Prince George's County, was thinking about running against Rep. Donna Edwards, but announced in January that he won't challenge her in a primary this year.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer is one of the few incumbents who will face a primary challenger. Andrew Gall, a public policy grad student from College Park, is trying to start a political career with a bang by mounting a primary challenge against Hoyer.

Gall said that long-term incumbents are part of the "status quo" that he's running against.

"If you look at the private sector, people are constantly bringing in new blood trying to keep up with the dynamism of business. You don't see that in government," Gall said. "If you had more turnover and more of an injection of new people and new vigor, you'll see a better result."

Lee said that even though ambitious young politicians may have their hearts set on a higher office, there's little they can do besides wait for the right opportunity.

"John Sarbanes and Chris Van Hollen are marking the years off the calendar waiting for an opening," Lee said. "A lot of guys wait their turn and they end up losing because things do change. New rising stars appear and all of a sudden the guys who were waiting get eclipsed by changing events and by time."

Lee said gerrymandered districts, the power of incumbency and domination by one party make it difficult to move up the ranks because those factors lead to a stagnant political environment.

"If we had a true two-party system in Maryland, which we don't, there would be less incumbency because Democrats could be defeated in general elections," said Lee. "We don't have the give-and-take of a two-party system, which helps choke and paralyze this mobility up the food chain."

All statewide elected offices, seven of eight congressional districts, both U.S. senators, and both chambers of the Maryland General Assembly are controlled by Democrats.

Murphy said entrenched incumbents may only be a career obstacle to politicians, but they can also have a chilling effect on the democratic process.

"When incumbents are not challenged, whether it's in the primary or in the general, then the voters have

fewer choices," said Murphy. "You've basically been disenfranchised because you don't get the opportunity to vote for someone else."

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"When people get defeated after being in office for a long time, it's often because they haven't been challenged enough," said Murphy. "If you're not challenged, then are you accountable to the voters?"

Van Hollen and Sarbanes could not be reached for comment.

Capital News Service contributed to this report.

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