

Ehrlich aide gets home detention for robo-call

BY AARON C. DAVIS

Former Maryland governor Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.'s campaign manager was spared jail time Thursday for approving a controversial robo-call to black voters, but he was sentenced to home detention, community service and a lengthy term of probation.

The Baltimore City judge who sentenced Paul E. Schurick said he hoped the combination of punishments would serve as a warning to political campaigns about the acceptable boundaries on influencing voter turnout.

Schurick, who had been an aide to leading Maryland Democrats before working for Ehrlich, a Republican, could have been sentenced to as little as three months' probation under state sentencing guidelines. But Circuit Court Judge Lawrence P. Fletcher-Hill said the punishment for Schurick's approval of auto-

mated calls that told black voters to "relax" and not worry about voting on Election Day 2010 needed to send a lasting message.

Fletcher-Hill sided with State Prosecutor Emmet C. Davitt, who requested that Schurick be placed under home detention. Schurick will be electronically monitored for 30 days, but he will be reminded of the conviction for far longer.

Schurick was sentenced to four years of probation. During that time, he will be required to perform 500 hours of community service to residents of Baltimore and Prince George's County, the majority-African-American areas targeted by the Election Day calls. Fletcher-Hill also ordered that Schurick could not work as a paid political operative while on probation.

"The offense committed in this case strikes at the heart of some of the most important values of this nation," Fletch-

er-Hill said. "This case needs to serve as a message to anyone who would interfere with any person's opportunity to vote; that it is absolutely unacceptable."

Fletcher-Hill, who could have sentenced Schurick to as much as 12 years in prison, said he was moved by more than 130 letters from prominent Republicans, Democrats, church leaders, community activists and others who wrote on Schurick's behalf seeking leniency.

Schurick also offered an emotional apology Thursday in court. He said he viewed his decision to approve the robo-calls as a "profound personal failure."

"It ended my career, it put my family through hell, but it was a mistake that I made. I accept responsibility for that," he said. "I'm here to apologize to every person and every institution that I have offended."

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Paul E. Schurick called his robocall decision a "profound personal failure."

Ehrlich aide: Robo-call decision 'ended my career'

ROBO-CALL FROM BI

A weeklong trial that ended with Schurick's conviction late last year revealed that the robo-calls had been placed to the homes of 112,000 voters in Baltimore and Prince George's. The call was placed in the hours before polls closed, as Ehrlich appeared to be trailing in a rematch with Gov. Martin O'Malley (D).

The calls told recipients who answered to "relax" because O'Malley had already been successful and that there was nothing left to do but to watch television.

In his apology, Schurick recounted how in a phone call on Election Day, he had taken the advice of Julius Henson, a campaign consultant, in approving the message. Henson is scheduled to stand trial next week for his part in ordering the call.

"In the course of a 90-second phone call, I made a decision that destroyed any legacy that I might have hoped to have left," Schurick said. "More importantly, I know I contributed to the public cynicism of politics, and that defies the respect I have for the political process."

Schurick added that he thought politicians statewide had learned lessons from his conviction. "These mistakes will not be repeated. . . . The outcome of this trial has been heard loudly and clearly across the state of Mary-



Paul E. Schurick, who was the campaign manager for Republican Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. in Maryland's gubernatorial race nearly two years ago, was sentenced Thursday to home detention, community service and probation for approving a robo-call aimed at black voters on Election Day in 2010.

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land."

But Fletcher-Hill, an O'Malley appointee, said he did not hold such a cheerful outlook. "I think there will continue to be people who try to exploit the [political] system and manipulate it," he said. "I think it is important that this case has demonstrated that there are boundaries. Even in the wide-open political process, there are boundaries that cannot be crossed and that are criminal in nature."

Schurick was convicted of trying to influence votes through fraud, failing to identify the

source of the robo-call as required by law, and two counts of conspiracy to commit those crimes.

At the request of Schurick's defense team and letters filed on his behalf, Fletcher-Hill left open the possibility that after Schurick completes most of his probation, his sentence could be amended to probation before judgement, essentially expunging the conviction from his record.

Outside the courtroom, Schurick maintained his much-condemned rationale for the call, saying that he believed it would make use of "reverse psychology" and

motivate potential Ehrlich supporters to go to the polls in the election's final hours.

Davitt, who had repeatedly sought to undermine that argument in court, said he was pleased with the sentencing.

"Mr. Schurick may not be a danger to the community. That's why we were not seeking incarceration. But we thought the seriousness of this matter required that there be some home detention," Davitt said. "This type of behavior is more than just dirty tricks or politics as usual."

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