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DEMOCRATIC DEBATE

GOP-bashing heavy so far in attorney general race

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State Sen. Marc Dann promoted himself as a champion of regular folks. Subodh Chandra touted his credentials as a litigator who helped turn around Cleveland's struggling municipal law department.

As both Democratic candidates for Ohio attorney general told an audience of about 100 lawyers who they are, they spent as much time talking about who they aren't: Republican incumbent Jim Petro and state Auditor Betty D. Montgomery, the leading GOP candidate for attorney general.

In their first debate, Dann, of the Youngstown area, and Chandra mostly avoided sparring but didn't hesitate to attack Petro and Montgomery as creatures of a Republican power structure that bred corruption in Columbus.

The debate's most heated moment came when Dann was asked whether his own missteps — a lien claiming he owes \$600 in back taxes and a reprimand from the Supreme Court for his handling of a divorce case — would undermine his credibility as a goodgovernment reformer.

Chandra didn't pound Dann on either point, but said the Democratic nominee would need to be "pure as the driven snow." Otherwise, Republicans will magnify every flaw in a multimillion-dollar advertising campaign, Chandra said.

"If you're explaining, you're losing," he said.

Dann responded that he's owned up to the mistake that led to the reprimand and angrily rejected the suggestion that he is ethically tainted.

"If Mother Teresa were running for attorney general, (Republicans) are going to kick the (expletive) out of her. That's how they operate."

Chandra, who served as Cleveland's top municipal lawyer from April 2002 to January 2005, has never held elective office. He spent much of the debate arguing that his legal qualifications outweigh his lack of political qualifications. The attorney general's office doesn't belong in the hands of a "politician with a law degree," he said.

Dann worked as a lawyer in private practice from 1991 until he was appointed to the Senate in 2001. Among the most vocal critics of Gov. Bob Taft, Petro and other Republicans, Dann said he would use the clout of the attorney general's office to influence policy and to act as an advocate for the public.

"I believe the attorney general should be a guard dog or a watchdog for the public in state government," Dann said.



Subodh Chandra, left, and State Sen. Marc Dann held their first debate yesterday, before the Franklin County Democratic Lawyers' Club.

Dann and Chandra both accused Montgomery of abdicating that responsibility. Both said the audit that Montgomery released yesterday of the rare-coin investment that Thomas W. Noe managed for the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation pointed fingers at Noe while letting politicians off easy.

"Betty Montgomery in her issuing this report today is awful cavalier in painting this as all the fault of these bad people who took advantage of the state of Ohio," Dann said.

Chandra said Montgomery and Petro acted "like lookouts at a bank robbery." As for the attorney general's role as an advocate for the public, Chandra said, "They haven't done much."

Montgomery spokesman Mark R. Weaver said Montgomery has taken a leading role in exposing the Bureau of Workers' Compensation's mismanagement of investments.

"Both Mr. Chandra and Mr. Dann are playing Mondaymorning quarterback about the entire Noe investigation," Weaver said. "Betty Montgomery has aggressively uncovered the truth and has gone where the facts took her."

Montgomery faces one opponent in the Republican primary for attorney general: state Sen. Timothy J. Grendell, of Chesterland, who is running as a more conservative alternative to Montgomery.

Yesterday's debate between the Democratic candidates was sponsored by the Franklin County Democratic Lawyers' Club. Several lawyers who attended said the Democratic contest pits two well-qualified candidates who both made good points.

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