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Making the Primary Grade: Without his party's endorsement, Chandra depends on real qualifications

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By Charu Gupta

Name recognition is everything in politics, and Subodh Chandra knows that he's starting at a disadvantage. Working a small crowd in Willoughby — 20 or so white, middle-aged Lake County Democrats — he confronts the moniker business head on.

Subodh sounds like "abode," he explains cheerfully. Chandra sounds like "tundra." The audience plays along when he asks them to repeat the words, but otherwise remains still.

Then the 39-year-old candidate for Ohio attorney general launches into his stump speech. Born in Oklahoma, came to Ohio to work with former governor Richard Celeste. The progeny of Indian immigrants, and now the father of triplet sons.

It's typical politician fare. The crowd's heard this sort of shtick before. But Chandra knows that, and he's ready.

Chandra brings up his triplet sons, now 2 years old, again, and how they keep him up at night. That leads to trouble distinguishing between reality and fantasy, he says. Without pausing, he dives into a telling of his "nightmare," in which a "fat cat contributor" is given \$50 million of state money to invest. Fat Cat chooses rare coins, Beanie Babies and autographed baseballs.

Then \$13 million goes missing, Chandra says, picking up the pace. And it turns out that other well-connected contributors have lost hundreds of millions more. He thrusts his arm forward, punctuating the amount.

"Hundreds of millions of dollars," he says again, jutting his arm out one more time. "That's money Ohio's struggling businesses and farms put into that system. Gone.

"Then you have the state auditor and the state attorney general. Let's call them Betty Montgomery and Jim Petro." A few chuckles percolate through the crowd. He notices, and slows down. "That's why it's a nightmare, because they've been trading jobs back and forth, back and forth" — his arms sway from side to side — "for almost a decade."

Chandra returns to his original frenzy, pointed and pissed. Montgomery audited the Bureau



CHANDRA Who is better prepared?

of Workers Compensation, "over and over and over and missed — *missed!* — hundreds of millions of dollars gone."

And when Petro gets a warning letter from the Securities and Exchange Commission, he sends it back. "Lookouts at the bank robbery," he then says of the two incumbents.

The audience is laughing openly now, and nodding eagerly. Chandra's arms wave, his fingers point, his hands stretch to his sides. He's a cross between a stand-up comedian and the wise man in the public square.

His slightly balding head moves to the clear, ironic tones he emits about doom and destruction if the status quo remains.

"I'm a Democrat, and I believe in recycling," he says. "But I'll tell you, there's some substances that shouldn't be recycled. Betty Montgomery (who's making another run for AG on the Republican ticket) should not be recycled."

The line gets the heartiest applause of the night.

Before Chandra leaves, his campaign aide collects 10 volunteer forms and two donations.

"You felt a connection," says Jan Haagen after Chandra's Willoughby appearance. Haagen wants Chandra's depiction of the Coingate and Tom Noe scandal blaring from rooftops. "It was a wonderful way to describe what's happening in Ohio."

Sue Stromberg is ecstatic over Chandra's energy. "He's the most exciting candidate in 2006," she says. "Some of the others out there can put you to sleep. But not this man."

Wood County Democrats were equally awed. Chairman Allen Baldwin says the group is known for its white-bread demographics. But after Chandra and Democratic primary opponent State Sen. Marc Dann (32nd District) addressed Wood County Dems, it was Chandra who walked away with the endorsement in a 97-23 caucus vote.

"I was shocked at the size of the margin," Baldwin says. "Chandra must have impressed them."

But Chandra has not been able to work the same magic on the party leadership. In February, the Ohio Democratic Party's steering committee voted 12-11 to recommend endorsing Dann. The executive committee seconded that with a 68-22 vote for Dann alone, dismissing the possibility of dual endorsements.

Similarly, in December, Ohio Senate Minority Leader C.J. Prentiss threw her weight behind the 43-year-old Dann, whom she called her "gentle bear" for lashing out at Republicans over Coingate and pay-to-play scandals. Chandra was good too, Prentiss said, but she knew Dann.

That line of reasoning infuriates other longtime Democratic Party insiders like Lana Moresky. Among Ohio's top fundraisers for the Kerry/Edwards campaign, Moresky is also a Democratic National Committee trustee.

"I dismiss the ODP endorsement of Marc Dann. I think they were wrong," Moresky says. "They did it probably because they were viewing [Dann] as the incumbent; but he's not an incumbent as attorney general."

There is little difference between Chandra and Dann when it comes to voicing anger over scandals and Republican-led policies that fail to control predatory lending or address Ohio's rank as the national leader in mortgage foreclosures.

Both also want the attorney general's office to aggressively combat entrenched corruption and greed. They want to review matters such as the constitutionality of the education budget — without waiting to be asked by the legislature — in light of four state Supreme Court rulings that call Ohio's funding mechanisms unconstitutional.

They want Ohio's attorney general to be the people's lawyer, and to join lawsuits filed by attorneys general in other states, like the recent one against lead-based paint manufacturers filed by the Rhode Island AG.

But the similarities end with the rhetoric.

The majority of Dann's career has been as a private divorce and injury lawyer. Throughout, however, Dann dabbled in politics. By the time he was 37, he had helped run at least eight campaigns. There was a failed state Senate bid in 1999, and two years later, he lobbied for and won an appointment to a vacant Senate seat.

Chandra, as an undergraduate at Stanford University, befriended then Ohio Governor Richard Celeste's son, Christopher. Soon, Chandra was invited to work with the governor in a program to train emerging Central and Eastern European leaders in democracy.

Chandra went on to Yale Law School, and returned to Ohio to work in private practice — corporate law and some criminal defense work.

In 1999 he heard about a black man who had been beaten by Cleveland police officers and then charged with robbery, and signed on pro bono. That's how he met Terry Gilbert, a veteran police brutality lawyer who was also working on the case.

After that, Chandra prosecuted health-care fraud in the U.S. Attorney's office. Then, in 2002, Chandra was appointed Cleveland's law director. Now it was Chandra's job to defend the police department. But working on the 1999 police misconduct case "allowed Subodh to have an open mind," Gilbert says.

Gilbert says many have treated the city law director post as a political stepping stone. "But Subodh took that law department to another level," Gilbert says.

Chandra's handling of Michael Green's case has become a hallmark in Cleveland's strides toward social justice. Green, falsely accused of rape, served 13 years in prison before DNA testing proved his innocence. In addition to a \$1.6 settlement, Chandra agreed to re-examine hundreds of cases that might have been similarly tainted.

Other law directors would have argued the case endlessly, Gilbert says, and passed it on to future law directors. "Subodh looked at how justice could be done, without betraying his obligation to the city. That was a breath of fresh air."

Chandra is also credited with slashing a \$7 million slush fund for outside counsel to \$700,000 by the end of 2004, when he left office. And he's known for increasing racial diversity. Under Chandra's watch, the percent of staff attorneys of color rose from 23 to 34 percent, according to then Chief Prosecutor Anthony Jordan.

Chandra "embodies all of the things you need to do the job of attorney general," Moresky says.

Sue Stromberg, the Lake County voter, has been following Chandra and opponent Marc Dann. "There's nothing bad on Dann; he's coming from a legislative background," she says. "Chandra would be going from one administrative position to another, and he's already shown himself to be very successful at that."

Now it's just a matter of the not-so-easy task of getting face time with voters across Ohio.

Every time he does, he seems to pick up more voters. That happened again last week with the Warren County Democratic Party's endorsement. Chandra met with members last October. And "people have just never stopped talking about this dynamic, forthright man who took us all by surprise," said Chairwoman Barbara Sizemore in a press release. "When he speaks, he brings so much clarity to the issues."

Seated next to each other for a Meet the Bloggers debate, Chandra and Dann are a contrast in styles. Chandra shows up in cowboy boots and an unbuttoned shirt; Dann is in a black suit, polished shoes and red tie.

Chandra jumps every question, then leans back as he speaks. Dann seems nervous, talks fast, and is quickly flustered by Chandra's repeated labeling of him as just a "politician with a law degree."

Not to be outdone, Dann takes up his attack-dog persona and shoots back, "People with Yale law degrees are a dime a dozen, but people with heart and passion are a lot harder to come by."

Chandra dismisses this with a wave of "faux populism." Who is better prepared, he asks.

It's Dann who perhaps best sums up the difference between the two candidates. Drawing primarily on his state senate work as qualification for AG, Dann says, "I've taken a policy leadership role, which is just as important as legal experience. The first thing I'll do in office is hire someone like Subodh."

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