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Senate hopefuls dash to primary day

December 7, 2009 07:02 PM

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Globe photo/Yoon S. Byun

Attorney General Martha Coakley greeting voters at South Station this evening.

By Brian C. Mooney and Matt Viser, Globe Staff, and Jack Nicas and Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondents

For three months, the candidates for US Senate have been trying to create voter excitement for a primary election that often seemed off the public's radar. On Tuesday, the campaign organizations will pull out all the stops to get those voters who were paying attention to come to the polls.

Democratic hopefuls scrambled to reach late-deciding voters today by every means possible -- by airwaves, telephone, in person, and via the Internet, and then turned the campaigns over to their ground games at the polls.

Bay State Senate seats open up about once in a generation, and the frantic schedules of the Democrats dashing around the state today, the last full day of stumping, served as a metaphor for a campaign whose erratic rhythm was dictated by the compressed calendar set by state law.

All the Democratic candidates -- Attorney General Martha Coakley, US Representative Michael Capuano, Celtics co-owner Stephen Pagliuca, and City Year cofounder Alan Khazei

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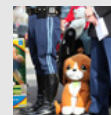
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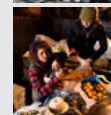
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-- have poured significant resources into their ground games, in which organizations identify supporters by telephone and Internet and then work to make sure they get to the polls.

Secretary of State William F. Galvin said turnout will probably be light because of the off-season timing of the election and a weather forecast of cold temperatures in the upper 30s. He projected it could be in the range of 500,000 to 600,000 voters out of 4.1 million eligible to cast ballots. About 37 percent are Democrats, 11.4 percent are Republicans, and 51 percent are independents who may vote in either primary.

Polls will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., and the winner of the Democratic race will face off against the winner of the Republican primary, state Senator Scott Brown or Duxbury businessman Jack E. Robinson, in the Jan. 19 special election for the seat of the late Edward M. Kennedy.

Pagliuca said today that a high turnout was imperative for him.

"Our surveys are showing that we do very, very well in a high turnout, we can win this in a high turnout," he said in an interview. "If it's a low turnout it's going to be tougher because we're running against two politicians with a very well established base."

Pagliuca targeted Eastern Massachusetts, greeting potential voters at the Owl Diner in Lowell with historian and author Doris Kearns Goodwin.

He also traveled to the Florence Sawyer School in Bolton to meet with students who wrote him letters asking him to come. The school, though, serves pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, meaning the students won't be a reliable vote for him until at least the 2014 midterm elections.

"If Bolton was deciding this thing, I'd win it by a landslide," Pagliuca said of the town of less than 5,000 people.

This afternoon, about two dozen Pagliuca supporters held signs in Copley Square, with the candidate's giant green bus, called the Jobs and Health Care Express, parked nearby.

In the background, one man rang a bell for Salvation Army donations, and another played Christmas carols on a saxophone outside the T stop. Several cars honked and a smattering of passersby stopped, but there was a noticeable uptick in activity once the campaign brought out the Celtics 2008 NBA championship trophy.

"Hey Steve, how's it going, pal?" said Vinny Brandano, who helps run a plumbing and heating business.

Others asked the candidate to stop for a picture of him with the trophy. Pagliuca, wearing an oversized Celtics parka with his brown slacks and loafers, obliged.

In Natick, Capuano greeted supporters at a late-afternoon rally. The former Somerville mayor said the most crucial factor in the final hours of his campaign was to personally reach out to as many voters as possible.



Former Governor Michael Dukakis with Capuano in Natick. (Globe photo/Bill Greene)

In lieu of sending out automated phone messages asking for support, Capuano said hundreds of volunteers have been calling from phone banks across the state to answer undecided voters' questions.

"I'm feeling really good about this," he said. "We're getting a lot of positive feedback ... but there are still a lot of undecided voters out there."

He said differences between himself and other candidates have become

more apparent in the past week, and he said his opponents "want to dot every 'i' and cross

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every 't,' and all I want to do is get people to work."

Local union members held up signs to motorists traveling by the building on Route 9. Massachusetts State Council of Machinists member Jim Howard, 62, of Plainville, said he planned to vote for Capuano, citing his experience in Washington as a key reason.

"Nobody's going to take Ted Kennedy's place, but I think Mike brings to the table a lot of Kennedy's principles and ideals."

Coakley also worked at the personal approach today, campaigning at South Station.

"We're feeling energized and we're really confident," Coakley said, predicting a 20 percent turnout for the primary. "One more vote than everybody else is the key," she said.

This evening, as her supporters -- as well as some Khazei backers -- waived signs and passed out campaign literature outside the station, Coakley worked the crowd inside the train station as commuters waited for their trains.

Dozens wished her good luck and promised they'd vote for her as about six campaign aides held campaign signs up high. Some stopped her to ask her position on health care or ask why they should vote for her.

Last night, about 200 people representing various unions that have endorsed Coakley, including SEIU IBEW and carpenters, went to the IBEW Local 103 Union Hall in Dorchester, where they chanted, "Martha! Martha!" and "Yes we can!"

"We're down to the wire," Senate President Therese Murray told them. "We have 24-plus hours, that's all. I need you, she needs you, we need you. ... They can say she's ahead in the polls, but we've seen the polls lie before."

Khazei and his 7-year-old daughter, Mirabelle, greeted rush hour commuters at Dudley Station in Roxbury last night, an early stop on Khazei's all-night tour for last-minute votes.

Khazei described himself as the guy who started City Year to many potential voters.

"You know, the kid with the red jackets," he told Elsie Francese, of Mission Hill.

"Oh, you did?" she said. "My grandson is involved in that."

Francese, who enlisted four grandchildren in City Year, said she planned to vote for Khazei after meeting him.



Khazei at Mike's Donut Shop, Mission Hill. (Globe photo/Joanne Rathe)

Khazei said his next stop was Porter Square via the T. He then had a full schedule for the rest of the night, including stops at a South End diner at 3 a.m. and the Chelsea pier to greet workers at 5 a.m.

"I want to meet everybody I can. Send a message that I'm going to work harder than anybody," he said.

Khazei said he did not plan to sleep until Tuesday night.

"Just a lot of coffee," he said. "But really, I get energy from the people."

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