

LEONARDTOWN -- St. Mary's County, in far Southern Maryland, has all of the ingredients for a Republican stronghold: farms, outer suburbs, affluent retirees and a strong military presence. It has consistently supported Republicans for president and governor in recent elections.

But at the county's annual oyster festival, the local congressman - the No. 2 Democrat in the U.S. House of Representatives - was greeted as a hero as he strolled from booth to booth.

Rep. Steny H. Hoyer, a one-time boy wonder of Maryland politics turned silver-haired elder statesman of 67, has tightened his grip on Maryland's 5th District congressional seat to the point where the Republican Party isn't contesting the race. His only opponent is a lightly funded Green Party candidate.

To observe Hoyer in action, campaigning even when he really doesn't need to is to understand his popularity. He moves easily through the fairgrounds, greeting old friends and hugging supporters such as federal retiree Marie Davis.

"I'm a Republican, and I'm for that man," Davis said. She said Hoyer came through for St. Mary's when the local military bases, including the sprawling Patuxent Naval Air Station - known as Pax River - went through the agonizing review known as Base Realignment and Closure, which determines which bases will grow, which will shrink and which will close. Through those reviews, the veteran congressman has been Pax River's most powerful defender.

Hoyer, said Davis, has been "very successful and very good for our county."

Zach Messitte, a political science professor at St. Mary's College of Maryland, said the district, though configured to be favorable to Democrats, would not be a "slam dunk" for the party without Hoyer on the ballot.

Messitte said Hoyer has "assiduously courted the military" and has delivered for the home folks. Nor has he let his leadership position or lack of strong opposition distract him from tending his base. "He's at ribbon cuttings, he's at festivals. Everyone seems to know him," Messitte said.

State Sen. Thomas M. Middleton, a Democrat who represents Charles County, said even hard-line Republicans support Hoyer. "Why do people vote for Steny Hoyer? Simply, it's the economy, stupid," Middleton said. "It's all about jobs."

The 5th District includes St. Mary's, Charles and Calvert counties, a sliver of Anne Arundel and a swath of Democratic-dominated Prince George's that extends to Laurel.

Hoyer moved to St. Mary's after the 1990 redistricting shifted the district's center of gravity southward to create a majority-African-American 4th District in Prince George's, Hoyer's original political base.

In 1966, he was elected to the state Senate from Prince George's at the age of 27. Advancing rapidly, he became Senate president eight years later at 35.

After an unsuccessful run for lieutenant governor in 1978, Hoyer was elected to his congressional seat in 1981. He has won re-election handily since then except for one close race in 1992, the first year his district included conservative Southern Maryland.

This year, the GOP isn't challenging him. When a promising newcomer, Ron Miller, filed to run against Hoyer, party leaders talked him into switching to an almost-as-daunting race against Maryland Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

"To some degree, it's a statement about what the public thinks about my representation," Hoyer said. "The Republicans decided they had limited resources and decided to save their money."

Audra Miller, a spokeswoman for the state Republican Party, said Hoyer has "long forgotten the people of his district." But she said the GOP decided to focus its recruiting efforts on state races this year instead of on Congress.

The Republicans' decision leaves Steve Warner, the 41-year-old candidate of the Green Party, as Hoyer's only opponent. Running against a powerhouse who has raised almost \$2 million, Warner said his campaign budget might reach \$10,000. Calling the Greens "the True People's Party," he is accepting contributions only from individual voters.

Warner, a construction manager from Solomons, has been waging a spirited campaign, staking out positions contrasting with the incumbent's on Iraq, health care and the need for less dependence on military-related jobs. But he said it hasn't been easy to get his message out.

"It has not been a very widely publicized campaign," he said.

With re-election all but assured, Hoyer has been spending much of his time helping Democratic candidates across the country as the party attempts to seize control of the House.

If the Democrats win a majority, Hoyer will be in line to be majority leader, the No. 2 position behind the speaker, probably California's Nancy Pelosi.

Hoyer might face a challenge for that post from Pennsylvania Rep. John P. Murtha, but he says Democrats will hesitate to break up a successful leadership team.

The prospect of having a friend in such a high place is attractive to many in Southern Maryland, where voters are acutely aware of their economic dependence on Pax River and other military posts.

Tom Daugherty, a local banker, calls Hoyer "a great asset" for the district.

"Steny cuts across all lines and manages to get support from both parties," said Daugherty. "We'd like very much to have the majority leader of the House representing us."