Building a Durable Republican Majority

It was almost 10 p.m. on Tuesday, November 6, 2018, and Larry Hogan was restless. The Associated Press had declared him a victor nearly an hour earlier, making him the first Republican governor in Maryland to win reelection in more than half a century. Hogan was eager to ascend the stage at the Westin hotel in Annapolis and bask in the cheers of supporters, rejoicing that he transcended the divisiveness and unpopularity of his party’s leader, President Donald Trump.

But he couldn’t just yet.

Voters were still waiting in line in Prince George’s County, the majority-Black, heavily Democratic jurisdiction outside Washington, DC, long after the polls were supposed to close. Local officials had miscalculated the ballots needed to meet the demand driven by anti-Trump sentiment. Couriers rushed through rain and traffic to deliver more, but crowds were growing, and Hogan’s opponent, former NAACP President Ben Jealous, was urging voters to stay. Declaring victory before the lines cleared would produce horrible optics. Hogan and his team didn’t make mistakes like that.

Soon enough, the last voters were entering their precincts and the State Board of Elections was updating results. The governor turned to his advisers and announced, “It’s time to go.”
His team readied the stage, and Hogan walked out around 10:30 p.m. to deliver his victory speech. Flanked by his wife, his running mate, and members of both families, the sixty-two-year-old governor beamed before the crowd: “Tonight, in a deep-blue state in this blue year, with a Blue Wave, it turns out I can surf!”

That night, the families onstage at the Westin represented a far more diverse portrait than is typically found at Republican victory parties. The governor’s wife, Yumi, an immigrant, and her daughters are Korean American; Lieutenant-Governor Boyd Rutherford, his wife, Monica, and their daughters are Black. Together, the families reflected the coalition that Hogan built and maintained in one of the most diverse states in the country.

Dressed in a dark suit and a purple tie, Hogan was jubilant but more physically weathered than when he took the same stage four years earlier. The aftermath of cancer treatments left him heavier and with a buzz cut where a full head of silver hair had been. He thanked Marylanders for putting aside partisan politics and voting for civility, bipartisanship, and commonsense leadership. He lauded the independents and “hundreds of thousands of Democrats” who crossed over and delivered him a second term.

*Blue-State Republican* is the story of how Larry Hogan, a lifelong member of a Republican Party now more defined by Donald Trump than Ronald Reagan, made it to that stage while many other Republicans across the country, and down-ballot in Maryland, were making concession calls. The GOP lost control of the U.S. House of Representatives, six state legislative chambers, more than three hundred State House and Senate seats, and seven governorships in that cycle. In Maryland, Republicans lost winnable races for county executive and fell well short of their goal to break the veto-proof Democratic majority in the Maryland State Senate. Other Republican candidates running for statewide office in Maryland lost their bids to unseat a U.S. senator, an attorney-general, and a state comptroller by an average of thirty-six points.

Hogan’s rejection of culture wars and Trump-style populism and rhetoric that has consumed much of the Republican Party enabled him to win the votes of Democrats and make significant inroads with key elements of their electoral coalition: college-educated voters, suburbanites, women, and racial minorities—notably, Black voters. And
his fiscally conservative values, mixed with a carefully messaged, pragmatic approach to governance, helped maintain the support of his base while appealing to the center-right voters who continue to make up a majority of the country. The result was a double-digit victory built by voters who abhorred Trump and the GOP, as well as those who were full-on Trumpian in a Democratic wave year.

Hogan’s victory has since catapulted him onto the national stage, but the journey to a second term didn’t get much attention or close examination outside of Maryland. He was a well-funded, popular incumbent in a state that most voters thought was heading in the right direction. He led in every preelection poll, despite a hostile national climate for Republican candidates. The widespread perception that Hogan was always going to win belied what it took to get there.

Maryland: Where Republicans Lose

The significance of Hogan’s 2018 reelection victory and his first win in 2014 become more apparent in the context of Maryland’s political history and demographics.

Simply put, Democratic dominance defines Maryland’s politics. In a state with twice as many registered Democrats as Republicans, Hogan had to earn at least a quarter of the Democratic vote to win, even if his opponent did not receive any Republican votes. It also meant that while an enthusiastic GOP base could not deliver Hogan the election, a low turnout among those voters could lose one. The state’s two population centers—the Baltimore metropolitan area and the Washington, DC, suburbs of Montgomery and Prince George’s counties—are overwhelmingly Democratic.

History is also on the Democrats’ side. Since 1960 the state has chosen only three Republicans for president: Richard Nixon in 1972 (with former Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew as vice president), Ronald Reagan in 1984, and George H. W. Bush in 1988. In presidential elections since 2008, the Old Line State has gone for the Democratic presidential candidate by an average of twenty-eight points.

Maryland has sent just two Republicans to the U.S. Senate in the past fifty years: James Glenn Beall, who served from 1971 to 1977, and Charles “Mac” Mathias, who served from 1969 to 1987. Republicans consistently filled three and sometimes four of the state’s eight
seats in the House of Representatives from 1963 to 2012. Democratic gerrymandering after the 2010 Census left Maryland with a single Republican-held congressional district.

Republican governors haven’t fared any better. Agnew served from 1967 to 1969 before resigning to become vice president. It would be thirty-four years before another Republican, Robert L. Ehrlich Jr., occupied the second floor of the State House. Only two Republicans in the history of the state—Theodore R. McKeldin, who served from 1951 to 1959, and Hogan himself—have ever served a second term.

Democrats have held veto-proof majorities in both legislative chambers of the Maryland General Assembly since 1922. The presiding officers of these chambers during Hogan’s rise and through his reelection bid, House of Delegates Speaker Michael E. Busch and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., were veterans adept at controlling the state’s policy agenda.

The Maryland Republican Party has never matched Democrats in organization, leadership, or fundraising. The deficiencies in the Maryland GOP are so pronounced that they have sometimes left the party without high-quality staff to run operations or candidates to challenge Democrats in high-profile races. In other words, it’s always an uphill climb for Republicans in Maryland, and Hogan could never rely on his state party to support his general election candidacy in any meaningful way. He had to build an organization outside of the party structure to achieve success.

Of course, Hogan was not the only Republican governor to win in a blue state in the 2018 cycle. Phil Scott of Vermont and Charlie Baker of Massachusetts won their reelection bids by large margins and earned similarly high job approval ratings in office. But Hogan has demonstrated more than the ability to win Democratic voters and like-minded independents. What sets his victory apart from his blue-state Republican contemporaries, and therefore makes Hogan a uniquely compelling study, is how he triumphed given Maryland’s racial diversity.

According to the 2020 U.S. Census, 48.7 percent of Maryland’s population identifies as white alone, and 29.5 percent of the population is Black alone. Almost 7 percent of Marylanders are Asian, and other races, including Marylanders who identify with multiple racial backgrounds, make up the remaining 14.5 percent. The state’s His-
panic population of any race is 11.8 percent. That makes Maryland the fourth most racially diverse state in the country, measured by the Diversity Index developed by the U.S. Census. Vermont is ranked forty-eighth, and Massachusetts is twenty-fifth.  

Given the history of near-unified support of Democratic candidates among Black voters and Democratic advantages among other racial minorities, Hogan faced not only an unfavorable political environment but also a demographic disadvantage. Blue-State Republican focuses primarily on how Hogan earned support from Black voters, who are a significant voting bloc in the state and produce the most robust support for the Democratic Party among any demographic group.

Maryland’s population creates additional challenges for Republicans outside of just the dynamics of party and race. There is a “diploma divide” in the electoral behavior of American voters, particularly among white voters. Polling by Gallup shows a significant and growing Democratic advantage in party and voter preferences among college-educated white voters since 2014. Exit polling from 2016, 2018, and 2020 shows a similar trend. Maryland is among the most college-educated states in the country, with 40.2 percent of residents twenty-five and older holding a four-year college degree.

The state’s proximity to Washington, DC, also presents a uniquely nationalized state political environment. According to the Maryland Department of Labor, Licensing, and Regulation, the state ranks first for federal jobs per capita, at 240 jobs per 10,000 residents. Residents who live near the District are inundated with DC-centered news even when tuned in to local outlets. In other words, decisions in Washington have an immediate economic impact on many residents—and therefore on the state’s electoral politics.

All told, Maryland presents some of the toughest political terrain in the country for Republicans. Understanding how Hogan won is not only useful for understanding Maryland’s politics; it can also provide insights into how Republicans can win in a diversifying America.

The Republican Autopsy and the Hogan Coalition

In fact, broadening the electoral map and moving the GOP toward a new center-right coalition that could gain the support of a major-
ity of voters was once an explicit goal of the Republican Party. In the Growth and Opportunity Project, a soul-searching postmortem ordered by Republican National Committee Chair Reince Priebus in the aftermath of Mitt Romney’s loss to Barack Obama in 2012, GOP analysts advocated moving away from “ideological reinforcement to like-minded people” and toward appealing to “more people, including those who share some but not all of our conservative principles.” To realize that goal, the “autopsy report,” as it was dubbed, recommended that the party modernize its campaigns and invest in outreach to Black, female, Asian, and Pacific Islander voters, as well as to gay Americans, and urged immigration reform to win over Hispanics and Latinos.12

A necessary first step was to suppress the power of Tea Party and fringe right-wing candidates, who many party leaders believed were the source of their most immediate electoral woes and presented a long-term problem. Establishment Republicans and affiliated advocacy groups, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, actively vetted and supported more business-friendly and traditional Republicans during the 2014 primary cycle.13

Establishment favorites went on to run the board in U.S. Senate Republican primaries, though some victories were by a narrow margin, and won most contested House primary races.14 The GOP dominated the 2014 general election cycle, taking control of the U.S. Senate and expanding its majority in the House of Representatives by fourteen seats. Republicans also added governors in the Democratic strongholds of Massachusetts and Illinois, in addition to Hogan’s win in Maryland. Tim Miller, a former Republican strategist who helped write the autopsy report and served as the communications director for Jeb Bush’s 2016 presidential campaign, describes this cycle as a “momentary glimmer of hope” that the GOP could move in the direction proposed in the autopsy report.15

Even Barack Obama recognized that “Republicans had a good night” after the 2014 midterms.16 But the veteran GOP pollster Whit Ayres wasn’t all that sanguine. The wins, he contended, were a “repudiation of the Democratic message and not an endorsement of a Republican alternative.”17 Still, Ayres and others believed that the Republican Party was poised to recapture the voter enthusiasm of the Reagan and George W. Bush years by building a policy platform
grounded in conservative principles but appealing to a broad swath of the electorate.

Ayres’s book *2016 and Beyond* (2015), widely read in Republican circles, showed that majorities of Americans agreed with the general concepts of limited but present government, fairness of opportunity, lower deficits, and reducing tax burdens while preserving popular programs such as Social Security and Medicare. In an interview about the 2016 presidential cycle, Ayres—who soon after signed on to Florida Senator Marco Rubio’s presidential campaign—told the *Washington Post*’s Jonathan Capehart that the party was one transformational candidate away from resurrection.18

Then, almost exactly one year later, *Politico* ran a story with the headline, “Trump Kills GOP Autopsy.”19

Donald Trump, the New York developer turned reality television star turned Republican presidential candidate, was certainly transformational. But he had no interest in creating a broad and durable coalition like the one imagined in the autopsy report. Establishment Republicans were horrified—or at least feigned horror—in the months that followed Trump’s entrance into GOP politics. But one by one, their preferred candidates faltered while Trump gained momentum, reenergizing the party’s Tea Party wing under his populist rallying cry: Make America Great Again.

Trump handily won the Republican primary and, surprising political analysts and insiders of all stripes, edged out the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, in key battleground states to win the presidency. He dismantled the so-called blue wall of Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania by appealing to primarily white voters. Analysis by political scientists and others concluded that Trump owed his win to some combination of white identity politics, authoritarian attitudes, racial animosity, sentiment about immigration, economic anxiety, and negative partisanship (Abramowitz and McCoy 2019; Green and McElwee 2019; Knuckey and Hassan 2020; Reny et al. 2019; Tolbert et al. 2018). They also credited Trump’s personal celebrity and media savvy, as well as Democratic strategic mistakes and the personal unpopularity of Hillary Clinton (Bordo 2018; Happer et al. 2019).

Still, Clinton earned 2.87 million more votes than Trump, making him the third straight Republican nominee to lose the popular vote. A shift of fewer than eighty thousand votes in Michigan, Pennsylvania,
and Wisconsin would have made her president. And that is exactly what happened in the next presidential cycle, when the Democratic nominee, Joe Biden, beat Trump by carrying the same trio of blue-wall states Clinton had lost while adding narrow victories in racially and ethnically diverse, but reliably Republican, Georgia and Arizona. Biden also improved on Clinton’s total vote share. The former vice president earned about 81 million total votes, the most in American electoral history, eclipsing Trump’s votes by more than 7 million.

Trump became the tenth elected president to run a second time and lose. And Democratic wins in the pair of Georgia’s U.S. Senate runoff races made him the first elected president since the Great Depression to lose control over the House, Senate, and presidency in a single term.

The electoral results of the 2018 and 2020 cycles and evidence from public polling and the 2020 U.S. Census brought to life some of the warnings of the GOP autopsy report. The number of white voters is shrinking. A failure to broaden the Republican Party’s base to include more racially diverse voters and close the gender gap will be a liability if the GOP continues its current course.

Exit polling conducted for CNN by Edison Research suggests that many demographic groups voted similarly in 2016 and 2020. While Trump’s marginal gains among Black and, particularly, Hispanic voters (mostly among men) in key states drove headlines, the big picture is that he and most Republicans lost heavily among voters of color. For example, 90 percent of Black voters, 65 percent of Latinos, 61 percent of Asians, and 55 percent of other racial groups backed Biden.20

Moreover, America’s youngest and most racially diverse generations of voters—millennials who are now reaching their forties and Gen Zers who have just reached voting age—both lean heavily Democratic and will eventually become the majority of the electorate. Most troubling for Republicans, voting patterns of the eldest millennials do not indicate they are growing more politically conservative with age.21

The most immediate cause for concern for Republicans comes from the populous suburbs of major metropolitan areas, including key Rust Belt and Sun Belt states. An analysis by the Brookings Institution demographer William H. Frey showed a Democratic advantage in these areas for the first time since Obama’s 2008 victory. Moreover, a Pew Research Center analysis found that Trump only narrowly won
white suburban voters in 2020, whereas in 2016 he won this group by sixteen points. College-educated voters, women, and the growing racial diversity of the suburbs all contributed to this result.

Still, disproportionate rates of turnout and ballot access for some minority voters, as well as the structural advantages built into the Electoral College and some of the heavily gerrymandered House of Representatives and state legislative districts that favor Republicans, will protect the GOP, at least for a time, from the immediate effects of demographic change.22

It’s still likely that Trump-style populism, culture wars, and conservative identity politics that appeal predominantly to white voters can win the Electoral College and majorities in the U.S. Congress over the next few cycles, particularly if Republican-led efforts to restrict ballot access are successful. At the same time, the 2020 election demonstrated that Democratic turnout operations that focus on dense and diverse metro areas such as Atlanta, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Detroit, and Phoenix can offset GOP gains among predominantly white voters in must-win Electoral College states.

The dynamics of the coalition Hogan built in Maryland, by contrast, offer the GOP the prospects of a durable majority where demographics are still destiny but not demise. Moreover, the ability for Republicans to compete for votes from a broader swath of American voters decreases the incentive to try to hang on to power through non-majoritarian means—such as voter-suppression tactics bolstered by false claims about the integrity of American elections—which threaten liberal democracy.

Indeed, the autopsy report called for “Republicans on the federal level to learn from successful Republicans on the state level.”23 Hogan is undoubtedly one of the GOP’s success stories from this era. He has stood as one of the most outspoken and visible among a handful of elected Republicans who have remained steadfast in their opposition to Trump and Trumpism. At the same time, unlike party defectors who believe that Trump and his seemingly unshakable support among many GOP voters have rendered the party beyond redemption, Hogan is committed to building a future for the Republican Party.

Speaking at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute shortly after the 2020 election, Hogan reaffirmed his belief that “the party of Lincoln and Reagan is the last best hope for our na-
tion” and asked, “Are we going to be a party that can’t win national elections, or are we willing to do the hard work of building a durable coalition that can shape our nation’s destiny?” Hogan’s ability to build a national Republican following around these notions, as well as whether his appeal to Democrats and independent voters can reach outside of Maryland is, as of this writing, untested.