

Maryland's Citizens Were the Biggest Losers

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The conventional wisdom is that Lt. Governor Anthony Brown and the Democrats lost this election, big-time. Of course that's correct. But the biggest losers in this election were Maryland's citizens--for this election was largely vacant of information that could help them decide the path that Maryland should take for the next four years.

Much of the fault lies with the two major parties. The Democrats did release a 145-page "Brown-Ulman Plan: A Better Maryland for More Marylanders." (I'll gladly send my hard copy to the first reader who asks for it.)

It was full of detailed proposals, consistent with the policy leadership and implementation skill of the O'Malley administration.

Governor O'Malley deserves much praise for his performance over two terms (with the notable exception of the health exchange disaster), but he was less successful in getting Marylanders to understand the progress that was made under his watch.

Brown's campaign made this problem much worse. It used simplistic mailers to encourage fear of Mr. Hogan on social issues such as gun control. And Brown wasn't alone--it was seemingly the only option in the playbook of Democratic campaign consultants in Maryland and across the country.

What a huge mistake. As Hogan properly realized, pocketbook issues were more important to most voters. Why would Maryland Democrats, who historically featured economic fairness in their platforms, not stay on that course? Because they worried about their vulnerability on tax increases that were necessary to survive a Great Recession, which was largely caused by the forces that support their partisan opponents. But repeatedly promising "no new taxes" in this campaign was insufficient protection from the narrative Republicans, and Hogan in particular, have been building over recent years.

Much of that narrative was false or misleading, yet many voters bought it. Though Maryland is still one of the richest and productive states in the nation, the Republicans convinced many that the economy was worse than most other states'.

Though even after the tax increases of recent years, when Maryland still has below-average tax rates per individual incomes, many voters came to believe that the tax burden promoted flight of high-income taxpayers (there's no convincing proof of this).

And they credited Hogan's promise to cut much spending that was wasteful--though analyses of his vague approach clearly showed that it lacked credibility.

Governor Hogan will have the budgetary power to require lower spending for programs that aren't driven by statutory formulas and entitlement provisions. He will find, as will voters, that cuts in these discretionary programs often have negative consequences. He will also need to negotiate with General Assembly Democrats to make spending reductions in formula and entitlement programs. But the Hogan campaign said not a word about any specific reductions that they intend to support, and they usually got a free ride on that.

More generally, detailed examinations of the many questionable claims by the competing candidates were far less available than typical media "horse race" analyses. That's understandable to some extent given how the media's challenging economics has reduced the size of the statehouse press corps. When fewer citizens pay for coverage, on average they are less well informed.

So in 2015, when the Governor and the General Assembly start to wrestle with very complicated issues, let's hope that they can deliberate over alternative options, carefully considering the details, and then compromise like adults--rather than emulate how most politicians in Washington behave. But I doubt that this election gave our state leaders any guidance about which policies they should adopt.