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Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan is one of the country's more popular governors, despite being a Republican in a blue state.

Hogan's GOP problem

What does the Democratic sweep in Virginia mean for Md.'s governor?

BY MARK J. ROZELL

Does the stunning Democratic wave in the Virginia elections portend trouble for Governor Larry Hogan and the Republican Party in Maryland next year?

Let's take a look.

Elections in Virginia have tended to focus on state and local issues with national trends playing a marginal role. But not this year, as President Donald J. Trump and his agenda were constantly at the forefront of the campaign. Mr. Trump's oversized presence in the election was sealed when the president weighed in with his controversial comments defending some of the white nationalist protesters who staged an ugly — and ultimately deadly — rally in Charlottesville.

The national political climate drove the Virginia elections beginning to end, bludgeoning every candidate on the ballot with an "R" next to his or her name in competitive races. Although polls suggested an advantage for Democratic gubernatorial candidate Ralph Northam, no one predicted both a complete landslide Democratic sweep of the three statewide offices and as many as a 15-seat pickup for the party in the General Assembly (pending some recounts).

Republican gubernatorial nominee Ed

Gillespie, a former Republican National Committee chair and George W. Bush White House adviser, is about as mainstream a Republican as you can get. But he staked his campaign on Trump-like appeals on immigration, crime and even football players taking a knee.

Result: He got crushed by an avalanche of Democratic voters in urban areas who turned out in huge numbers for an off-year election cycle. Minority turnout was strong, and the educated white component of the electorate — a former reliable GOP voting block — went overwhelmingly Democratic.

Swept along in the avalanche were the other statewide candidates and many state legislative seats. The Virginia elections were the first real electoral tests of what it portends to run as a Republican in the Trump era, and the outcome leaves no doubt as to its meaning: The party is in big trouble next year.

With an overheated national political climate driven by a constant-attention-dominating president, it especially stands to reason that GOP candidates in a very blue state next year will be looking at the same fate, or worse, than the Republicans suffered in Virginia.

But that is unlikely to be the case in Maryland. Governor Hogan has advantages unlike the GOP candidates in Virginia, beginning of course with his

generally strong popularity and incumbency status. Popular governors usually don't lose re-election, even in other-party wave election years.

Further, Mr. Hogan has largely inoculated himself from the excesses of Trumpism. By denouncing some of Mr. Trump's actions and pronouncements, while many in the national GOP have either supported the president or been silent, he stands out as committed more to principles than to reflexively supporting anything Republican. That largely works to his political advantage.

The best advice is for the governor is to do quite the opposite of his Virginia counterpart Gillespie: Run as his authentic self. Mr. Gillespie thought the ticket to victory was to stoke the base. It didn't work there, and it sure won't work in Maryland.

Mr. Hogan has shown that a Republican can be electorally successful in a very blue state with policy and rhetorical moderation, and an emphasis on technocratic good-government values that appeal to educated white moderates. He needs to stick to the formula that best represents his true self and ignore the larger national forces over which he has no control — and hope for the best.

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