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O'Malley Cruises in Midst of Republican Wave

Maryland Governor Benefits from Reputation as Competent Manager



SOURCE: AP/Jacquelyn Martin

Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley's victory Tuesday could be due to his focus on results in government.

By **Reece Rushing** | November 5, 2010

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As Democrats suffered mass defeats on Tuesday, Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley doubled his margin of victory from 2006—a so-called wave year for Democrats. These results cannot be explained by O'Malley's Republican opponent. He faced former Maryland Gov. Bob Ehrlich in both races. Instead, it might have something to do with his trademark data-driven approach to governing, which helped Maryland weather the economic storm better than most states.

“Our approach to governing, even in the toughest of economic times, is founded on the principles of accurate and timely intelligence shared by all, rapid deployment of resources, effective tactics and strategies, and relentless follow-up and assessment,” O'Malley told the Center for American Progress. “This national recession has tested the effectiveness of smart, progressive governing, but we're coming through these tough times stronger and more quickly than other states.”

O'Malley's resounding 56 to 42 percent victory provides an important lesson for progressives looking to recover from Tuesday. At times of economic uncertainty, voters reward leaders who project managerial competence and who have a track record of delivering results.

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The former Baltimore mayor gained national recognition for creating **CitiStat**, a system of relentless measurement and follow-up to improve government services. In Annapolis, this approach became the **StateStat system**, which tracks the performance of state agencies, and **BayStat**, which monitors cleanup of the Chesapeake Bay. A *Washington Post* profile just before the election focused on O'Malley's attention to detail and management.

Marylanders' vote of confidence in O'Malley comes as public trust in government is at a low point in the wake of the worst economic crisis in 70 years. But a recent **Center for American Progress poll** found that Americans, by a decisive 62 percent to 36 percent margin, still prefer making government more efficient and effective over reducing its size. Voters may be responding to O'Malley's approach because they see him delivering this sort of government.

The poll, conducted for CAP by Hart Research and Associates, asked the public about a range of possible government reforms at the federal level. The highest-rated reform was this: "Require federal agencies to set clear goals measured by real-world results." Eighty-two percent of the public thought this approach would be effective or highly effective, with 68 percent saying it would be highly effective.

O'Malley is following this blueprint. He has set 15 "strategic goals" for the state against which progress is measured. These goals include creating or saving 250,000 jobs, boosting student achievement by 25 percent, reducing violent crime by 20 percent, and ending childhood hunger by 2015.

The public's awareness of these goals is unclear—*The Washington Post* describes them as "little noticed." But O'Malley's general approach has high public visibility. StateStat, like CitiStat before, receives regular press attention. And O'Malley uses it as a central part of his message, both on the campaign trail and in day-to-day governing. Voters seem to like what they hear.

Other factors, of course, may have aided O'Malley's victory, too. Maryland is friendly territory for Democrats—the party holds a 2-to-1 advantage over Republicans in the state. Ehrlich also lacked fresh-face appeal, having served as governor and lost to O'Malley once before. And Maryland's unemployment rate stands at **7.5 percent**, more than 2 percentage points lower than the national rate.

But these factors did not save incumbent House Democrat Frank Kratovil from defeat. Nor did they prevent Democrats from losing six seats in the state House of Delegates. O'Malley's 14-point margin of victory suggests something more was at work.

Reece Rushing is Director of Government Reform at American Progress.

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