A grass-roots cure for the Maryland GOP

By Marta Mossburg
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For Maryland Republicans, the joke is no laughing matter.

Gov. Martin O'Malley and Democrats all but engineered the demise of the Maryland GOP through redistricting at the congressional level. It showed in the trouncing of Republican candidates in the election earlier this month. The contest between 10-term Republican incumbent Roscoe Bartlett and challenger John Delaney in the 6th Congressional District says it all: 58.6 percent for Mr. Delaney and 38.1 for Mr. Bartlett.

State-level redistricting also squeezed the party, and Democrats likely plan to strengthen their hegemony by making it harder to push a law to the ballot in the next legislative session. In what can only be called a classic case of rubbing it in, Mr. O'Malley recently told WBAL it was "a little too easy" to petition a law to the voters following the loss of three referendums put on the ballot by MD Petitions, founded by Republican Del. Neil Parrott of Washington County.

Conservative activists are down about this state of affairs. Really down. But they are not relying on the party for redemption and see a path to relevance in grass-roots organizing.

Ann Corcoran, a former environmental lobbyist turned property rights activist from Washington County, recommends that people get involved locally to change policy from the bottom up: "We all joke about community organizing, but that's how they [liberals and progressives] got where they are today."

The author of a popular blog, Potomac Tea Party Report, she points to stopping a bike trail in Washington County bisecting private property as a recent success and example of how residents can impact public policy and hold elected officials accountable. "We basically have to become guerrilla warriors," she added, because, "We are not going to win electorally."

Catharine Trauernicht co-founded MDCAN (Maryland Conservative Action Network) in 2010 with Ms. Corcoran and two others as a way to bring together Maryland conservative groups that

didn't previously have a way to organize. The first conference, in 2011, drew 200 people, and the group plans another for Jan. 12. Earlier this year, MDCAN co-sponsored a training boot camp for citizen journalists for 50 people with the Franklin Center (where I am affiliated). Ms. Trauernicht says, "Grassroots conservatism in Maryland is sprouting everywhere across the state."

Delegate Parrott says he is not giving up at the polls. Despite the fact that gay marriage, in-state tuition for some illegal immigrants and redistricting passed — the three laws his organization helped bring to the ballot — he argues the referendum remains a powerful tool for conservatives to check the majority party's "ideological agenda." His original thinking — that he could get the issues on the ballot and the rest would fall into place — proved false, he said, and he now knows he needs a well-funded campaign once an issue makes it to a vote. "We are going to have to think from beginning to end," he said.

Many people have criticized Alex Mooney, head of the state Republican Party, for the election results. He says there is no alternative but to keep fighting. "All I know is that if you do nothing, it's locked in," he said.

Raising the money to make that happen will be hard, however. And aside from the demographics of Maryland and redistricting, there may be something working against a Republican resurgence at a very basic level, according to Carroll County Commissioner Richard Rothschild. He argues that Republicans by nature are "individualists," while Democrats are "collectivists" and more willing to work together across group lines to achieve their goals.

He said this at a meeting of the Maryland Center-Right Coalition on Nov. 8 in Sykesville, where about 20 dejected conservatives met to dissect their massacre at the polls with a smiling Sarah Palin hanging overhead, GOP paraphernalia of years past scattered around and air redolent of the cigarette smoke of days past.

Mr. Rothschild may be right, but he has some reason to hope. More than half of local officials in Maryland are Republican.

No one cares about that now. But as Mark Meckler, the co-founder of the largest tea party group in the U.S., said, the wave of conservative candidates for water and school boards and

other local positions across the country "will have repercussions for the next 20 to 30 years."

If only conservatives can hang on that long in Maryland.

Marta H. Mossburg is a senior fellow at the Maryland Public Policy Institute and a fellow at the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity. Her column appears regularly in The Baltimore Sun. Her email is
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