

Larry Hogan puts new pressure on Maryland Democratic primary

The former governor raises the stakes in a narrowly divided Senate map.



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BALTIMORE, Md.—The race to replace retiring Sen. Ben Cardin in deep-blue Maryland was all but certain to be decided in the Democratic primary. Maryland was off the national radar and not considered a state that could determine control of the Senate. Then, popular two-term former Gov. Larry Hogan, a Republican, unexpectedly entered the race at the last minute—upending months of plans from both parties as they battle for control of the Senate.

With the retirement of Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, Republicans likely need to flip just one more seat or win the White House to win control of the Senate. Recruiting Hogan helps their odds on an already favorable map and could force both parties to spend big on the race.

Hogan left office in 2023 with a [77 percent](#) approval rating, and he is known to be a fierce campaigner. His popularity and name recognition make him the only Republican who can make the race competitive, though he may still face an uphill climb.

Now the two leading Democrats—Prince George’s County Executive Angela Alsobrooks and Rep. David Trone—have less than three months until the May 14 primaries to make the case to voters that one of them is the best candidate to take on the former governor.

The Democratic primary was already tense without the added pressure from Hogan. Trone, a wealthy self-funder, has been leading in the polls, but Alsobrooks has pulled high-profile endorsements.



Trone has poured over [\\$23 million](#) into his campaign, blanketing the airwaves since May with a dozen TV ads. Trone told *National Journal* he’s prepared to spend “whatever it takes” to win the seat, but he also said that if he is the nominee, he [may need help](#) in the general election from the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee.

“Voters really respond to the fact that you’re willing to spend money you earned—hard-earned, didn’t start with anything—and take your resources to pay your own way,” Trone told *National Journal*. He says that spending his vast wealth on the campaign prevents him from relying on money from PACs and special-interest groups.

Though Trone has the cash advantage, Alsobrooks has institutional support. Maryland political observers say that, with Alsobrooks scoring high-profile endorsements from Gov. Wes Moore, most of the state’s Democratic congressional delegation, and Sen. Chris Van Hollen, it’s difficult to say either Democrat is the clear front-runner. But Alsobrooks will have to overcome Trone’s monetary advantage when it comes to advertising—she released her first TV ad earlier this month. The congressman has led Alsobrooks in all the limited public polling on the race so far.

At a recent stop at the Enoch Pratt Library in Baltimore, she spoke to the Silver Angels, a group of senior Black women. She told them about her work in Prince George’s County and her career path from domestic-violence prosecutor to county executive.

Having spent more than a decade in courthouses before she was elected county executive in 2018, Alsobrooks talked about the people she often saw seeking second chances. She said she believed many of those people had “never gotten their first chance” at getting addiction treatment or accessing mental health care or affordable housing.

Recounting her first successful run for county executive in 2018, Alsobrooks told the women that she’s no stranger to tough races.

Debi Allen, a lifelong resident of Baltimore, had not heard much about Alsobrooks before she met her at the Silver Angels meeting. But after hearing Alsobrooks, Allen said she was “leaning toward her” and would campaign for her.

“I hear so much about [Trone] because he has the ads on TV and in the mail. But I knew he had to be running with someone,” Allen said.



Former Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (AP Photo/John Locher, File) ASSOCIATED PRESS

Barbara Faltz Jackson, a former teacher and resident of Baltimore since 1967, had not heard of Alsobrooks before she spoke to her group. Though she would not say if she would vote for Alsobrooks, Jackson said, “I’m feeling stimulated, really excited.”

If Alsobrooks wins the election, she’ll become the state’s first Black female senator. Only two Black women have been elected to the Senate. The third Black female senator, Sen. Laphonza Butler of California, who has endorsed Alsobrooks, was appointed to the Senate last year following the death of Sen. Dianne Feinstein. Butler, however, is not running for a full term.

Maryland is the [most diverse](#) state on the East Coast. State political observers say Black voters make up as much as 40 percent of the Democratic primary electorate and will be key to deciding the race. Black voters accounted for [32 percent of all](#) registered voters in 2022, according to Census figures.

“African Americans are the largest, most loyal voting bloc that the Maryland Democratic Party has, and if a candidate is able to really solidify support among them, then that can be the deciding factor in an election,” said Todd Eberly, a political science professor at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

Several of Trone’s [ads](#) prominently feature Black speakers. In one, he touts his endorsement from House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries. In another, Rep. Jonathan Jackson, the son of civil rights leader Rev. Jesse Jackson, gives a direct-to-camera endorsement of Trone.

Devin Tucker, a Black resident of Laurel, Maryland, who’s still undecided, told *National Journal* at a Trone campaign event that believes Trone’s record on criminal-justice reform could make him stand out to Black men, who have historically been incarcerated [at higher rates](#) than other groups. Tucker said that the challenge for Alsobrooks may be how to compete with Trone’s narrative.

“At the end of the day, I have confidence in the voters,” Alsobrooks told *National Journal*. “I know that the voters are attentive and sophisticated. They will take the time to study my record and to study [Trone’s] record. And they will make the choice.”

“As Baltimore goes, the whole state goes.”

— REP. DAVID TRONE



Though he may have to reintroduce himself to this crucial voting bloc, Hogan had an [81 percent approval](#) rating among Black voters when he left office in 2023. In 2018, Hogan’s support among Black voters [more than doubled](#) after his first gubernatorial bid in 2014.

But despite his popularity, it’s still likely going to be a tough campaign for Hogan.

He will be forced to respond to polarizing national issues—abortion rights, Supreme Court appointments, assault-weapons bans—in a presidential election year with former President Trump at the top of the ticket. President Biden won Maryland by more than 33 points in 2020. And as of January 2023, registered Democrats outnumbered registered Republicans [2 to 1](#).

“This race will focus on the binary question: Are you going to caucus with Mitch McConnell, or are you going to caucus for Chuck Schumer,” said Len Foxwell, a Maryland-based Democratic strategist.

Hogan’s spokesperson Michael Ricci said the former governor “won’t be a rubber stamp for anyone,” including Senate Minority Leader McConnell, who [took credit](#) for recruiting him. “There’s a reason all politics is local, and that’s the kind of approach the governor will take on the campaign trail.”

Right now, both of the Democrats are focused on Baltimore. Black residents represent the largest racial minority group in Baltimore city, where they make up more than [61 percent](#) of the population, and in Baltimore County, where they make up more than [31 percent](#) of the population.

Trone’s campaign says the race will be decided in Baltimore city and County, and Alsobrooks has made frequent stops in Baltimore, with her campaign saying the region is crucial to winning the race.

It could be the key to winning in more than one way: Hogan [lost to](#) opponent Ben Jealous in Baltimore city, Montgomery County, and Prince George’s County in 2018, highlighting the former governor’s weak spot.

“As Baltimore goes, the whole state goes, so Baltimore’s success is the key to helping drive the rest of the state engine,” Trone said. [NJ](#)

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