



By Matt Bricken

## Beware the October Surprise

One month before Election Day 2022, Wes Moore was primed to be elected the next governor of Maryland. His campaign was riding the momentum of a hard-fought victory in a highly competitive Democratic primary; one in which Moore defeated nine competitors, winning by just 15,000 votes out of over 600,000 cast. Polls revealed Moore held a 32% lead over his general election opponent, freshman state lawmaker Dan Cox. This was a commanding lead, the kind where you would forgive the Moore campaign for swapping some door-knocking for a day measuring the curtains at Government House, the official residence of the state's top executive. However, the Moore campaign was about to receive a scare—what political consultants call an “October Surprise.”

On October 5, 2022, an independent news outlet, [Baltimore Brew](#), reported that Moore and his wife owed the city more than \$21,000 in water and sewer bills. In fact, the last time Moore paid his water bill was 19 months earlier, in March 2021. The Moore campaign said the candidate was unaware of the balance until the [Baltimore Brew](#) reporting.

Ultimately, this October Surprise did not pose a threat to Moore's campaign as he bested his opponent by a margin of 9.8 percent. But the damage was done. Questions were asked. How does one forget a five-figure utility bill? What type of aquatic feature did the Moores have in their residence, people joked, that could consume such enormous amounts of water? A Baltimore organizer quoted in the [Washington Post](#) called out “wealthy people” who can afford to pay their bills but refuse, shifting the burden onto “working class” Baltimoreans. Days later, Moore paid the entire bill, but the question remains: Did Moore's team conduct any research on their candidate to identify and defuse this and other surprises?

Moore's Water-bill-gate should have been caught by professional political investigators known as “opposition researchers” long before it made news. Practitioners of the political dark arts, they research not only rivals, but also their own employers: they put their candidate under the microscope to find potential vulnerabilities before they arise on the campaign trail. This “self-due diligence” focuses on a candidate's political history, including voting record, missed votes, speeches, and bill sponsorships. Campaign donors are scrutinized to identify potential “pay-to-play” claims. It also entails a scrutiny of every facet of a candidate's personal life, from an examination of business and litigation filings through arrest records, property records, a full social media sweep, and yes, even checking to see if the candidate has paid his property taxes and utility bills on time.

So-called “Oppo-” and self-research were once luxuries only big campaigns could afford. Today, oppo consultants armed with caffeine and laptops are viewed as a necessary for modern campaigns from the city council to US Senate. Whether campaigns use both oppo- and self-research is another question. Routinely, candidates balk at self-research, claiming there is no dirt to find. Seasoned campaign managers know better: an investment in self-research will help them sleep well, eliminating the fear of unknown skeletons in the closet—an October Surprise.

To be fair to Maryland’s newly elected governor, Wes Moore is a political newcomer. It is not known if his campaign engaged in self-research, but it would appear it did not. Had the campaign done so, the unpaid utility bill would have been uncovered and paid, eliminated as factor in the race. The Moores would have settled their debt quietly and his campaign communications team would have crafted a response and kept it at the ready. Instead, when Baltimore Brew broke the news, Moore’s campaign responded: “We’re looking into this...” Along with everyone else in Baltimore, it turned out.

Corporate leaders take note: the danger of an October-like surprise is not faced exclusively by politicians. Overconfidence that one’s record is spotless can be deadly. While it may cause some discomfort, a professional self-due diligence exercise undertaken to identify vulnerabilities, while frightening, can save future heartache. While it likely cannot make the skeletons disappear, it can provide time to prepare a response. There is an expression in political campaigns, “If you are explaining, you are losing.” The same is true in the corporate world, where surprises are not exclusive to October. Do your research. Manage your reputation.

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