

Legislative Review 2016

With the 2016 legislative session finished, we are disappointed that little genuine progress was made on good government reforms in the past 90 days. While the legislature made some advances this session, particularly on expanding access to voting, overall we saw no meaningful progress on key reforms. At a time when the public is clamoring for open and honest government and is sick and tired of political duplicity, the lack of action on these issues sends the wrong message.

While we are keenly disappointed that the state legislative session failed to address so many issues, Common Cause Maryland will continue the fight this summer – in the nation’s capital, in our counties, and in summer legislative studies.

Access to Voting

At a time when so many states are erecting barriers to voting, Maryland took significant steps to tear barriers down. These bills will help ensure that all voices are heard in our elections:

- **PASSED** Freedom to Vote Act (HB1007): Modernize our voter registration system and increase opportunities to register to vote. This legislation will give many agencies already offering voter registration services a technological upgrade, and will also expand registration opportunities to a suite of new agencies.
- **PASSED** Unlock the Vote (SB340/HB980): Reinstate legislation that will streamline the process through which former felons regain their ability to vote, restoring voting rights to 40,000 Marylanders.
- **PASSED** Special Election Reform (HB260): Give voters a voice in the event of vacancies in the offices of United States Senator, Attorney General, and Comptroller by mandating that replacement appointees be selected from the same party as the elected officials who vacated the position and that a special election for the position be held in the next scheduled election year.
- **PASSED** Expand Early Voting Centers (HB1008): Increase the number of early voting centers across Maryland, in order to expand access and increase participation.
- **PASSED** Budget Bill (SB190): Require the State Board of Elections to audit the new machines after the primary, ensuring that the transition to secure voting systems is successful.

Redistricting Reform

Maryland’s process for drawing congressional and legislative district lines is broken. Governor Hogan convened a Commission to study solutions last fall, and introduced legislation based on its recommendations. Unfortunately the legislature failed to act on this important reform.

- **FAILED** General Assembly and Congressional Legislative Redistricting and Apportionment Commission (SB380/HB458): Establish an independent commission to draw both congressional and legislative district lines to ensure that the maps are drawn in a fair, transparent process. The newly drawn districts will be compact, contiguous, and respect county and municipal lines.

Campaign Finance

Maryland must do more to fight back against the flood of dark money pouring into our elections. While we saw a few discrete reforms pass this session, we have a lot of work ahead of us to ensure our next state elections are decided by the voters, not the big donors.

- **FAILED** Avoid a Constitutional Convention (SJ5/HJ6): Interests on both sides of the political spectrum are attempting to force a constitutional convention that would throw our system of government into chaos. Maryland has four constitutional convention calls on the books that must be rescinded. While we are relieved our legislature did not pass any new calls this session, we missed a critical opportunity to rescind those existing calls.
- **PASSED** Civil Penalties for Fundraising During Session (SB408/HB241): Allow the State Board of Elections to level civil penalties against elected officials who fundraise during the “blackout” period of the legislative session.
- **PASSED** Reform petition process and protect the ballot (SB 459/HB963): Ensure transparency in our petition process by establishing reporting requirements for petition drives.
- **PASSED** Budget Bill (SB190): Restored \$1 million of previously diverted funds to the Fair Campaign Finance Fund, the Gubernatorial fair elections program.
- **FAILED** Legislation that would ensure Super PACs are not secretly working with candidates (HB1201), require repayment of loans to candidates (SB290), require shareholders to approve political spending (SB501), ban foreign spending in our ballot campaigns (SB420), and free our courts from the influence of money in politics (SB179/HB448).

Transparency and Accountability

Open and transparent government is critical for an accountable democracy. In 2015, the Center for Public Integrity gave Maryland a grade of D for public access to information. Unfortunately, Maryland only took meager steps towards advancing transparency this year.

- **PASSED** Board of Public Works Transparency Act (SB370/HB368): Require the Secretary of Budget and Management to provide at least 3 days’ notice before budget reductions may be approved by the Board of Public Works.
- **PASSED** Public Access to Information: Ensure that agendas are available for public meetings (HB217) and address the failure of the Howard County school board to provide public documents to parents (HB1105).
- **FAILED** Ensure Open Meetings Accountability (HB823/SB754): Ensure that members of public bodies understand their responsibilities under the Open Meetings Act.
- **FAILED** General Assembly Video Streaming of Meetings (HB 316): Make all meetings of the Senate, House, and standing committees available to the public via online videos.

Public Ethics

Ethics laws set standards of behavior for lobbyists and ensure transparency and accountability for elected officials. The legislature missed opportunities to address recent issues of concern.

- **FAILED** Promoting Responsible Agency Oversight (SB973/HB1230): Prohibit a secretary of a principal department of the Executive Branch of State government from soliciting contributions or donations from an entity doing business with the State.
- **PASSED** Increasing Oversight of Conflicts of Interest (SB395): Create a uniform set of requirements to police conflicts of interest to increase accountability in local government.
- **FAILED** Ethical Stewardship of Government Property (HB5): Mandate that certain government furnishings be put up for auction, instead of being sold or transferred at a loss to office-holders.

Common Cause Maryland is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to restoring the core values of American democracy. Founded in 1974, CCMD is one of the state’s most effective watchdog groups.

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