

2024 LEGISLATIVE PRIORITIES

This is a landmark year for Common Cause Maryland: as we head into the 2024 legislative session, we will be celebrating fifty years of fighting for an honest, open, and inclusive democracy. Since our founding in 1974, our team of democracy experts, past and present, have passed pragmatic, common-sense reforms that have strengthened democracy in Maryland. That work continues this session.

In preparation for critical elections this year, Common Cause Maryland will be supporting legislation that ensures every vote counts, that every eligible voter has an equal say, and that our elections reflect the will of voters. We will also champion pro-democracy reforms that create greater accountability and build on our efforts for over half a century to create a truly participatory democracy at all levels of government. Though we expect many bills will be introduced this year, the list below outlines our priorities for the 90-day session.

Voting and Elections

Maryland Voting Rights Act – Many of the protections enshrined by the VRA of 1965 have been eliminated or weakened in the last few decades. Alongside rampant restrictive voting policies, barriers to voting have significantly increased. The consequences disproportionately impact Black and Brown, first-time, rural, and limited English-speaking voters. This session we will be working to codify several aspects of the landmark 1965 federal Voting Rights Act with specific enhancements tailored to protect all Maryland voters.

Protections for Election Officials – Election officials throughout Maryland and the nation are demanding that protections be put in place as they prepare for upcoming elections. Many of them have been the target of ongoing threats and harassment, with some even leaving their roles out of fear. This session we will be working to ensure election officials – state, local, and even election judges – feel safe at work during the 2024 election cycle.

Expand Language Access – While we have worked to pass reforms that have made our elections more accessible, Maryland voters only benefit if the options for voting and the overall process are in a language they can understand. The multilingual elections legislation aims to change the language access threshold that triggers translations in a county from 5% to 2%, expanding the number of languages that are required for the translation of almost all election-related materials in jurisdictions meeting the new threshold. It provides a mechanism for reviewing translated materials before being finalized and provides voters with the option to ask questions in their language using a secure nonpartisan hotline managed by the State Board of Elections.

Voting Access for Incarcerated and Returning Citizens – We continue to work with the Expand the Ballot coalition to ensure returning citizens and eligible incarcerated citizens are made aware of their right to vote and have meaningful access to voting and voting information. This session we will be supporting two reforms. The first aims to expand the agencies covered by our automatic voter registration program to also include the Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, affirming for returning citizens that their right to vote has in fact been restored while providing the opportunity to register to vote as they leave. The second would put an end to felony disenfranchisement.

Greater Access to Voter Registration – Thousands of eligible Marylanders have registered to vote or updated their registration through our Automatic Voter Registration (AVR) program, increasing the number of eligible voters who participate in our democracy. This session we aim to build on the success of the program with an update that would streamline our AVR process, removing unnecessary steps for registration and greatly decreasing the number of

eligible voters who unintentionally decline registration while engaging with agencies like the Motor Vehicle Administration. We will also be supporting efforts to lower the pre-registration age from 16 years old to 15 years and 9 months, providing young people the opportunity to register when they first become eligible to apply for a learner's permit. The small but impactful change will also expand the pool of young people who are eligible to serve as election judges on Election Day and, more importantly, help engage the next generation of civic leaders.

Transparency and Accountability

Affordable Access to Government Records – Marylanders have the right to access public records through the Maryland Public Information Act (PIA). Unfortunately, even with significant improvements made to the program and the expanded jurisdiction of the PIA Compliance Board, public information remains inaccessible to many due to excessive fees. The process for requesting records must be less expensive because transparency is critical to the health of our democracy. This session, we will be working with the Marylanders for Open Government coalition to expand the Compliance Board's jurisdiction over fee waivers, establish a mandatory indigent fee waiver, standardize payment of fees, and adopt standard criteria to assist custodians in assessing public interest waivers.

Money and Influence

Expansion of Small Donor Public Financing Programs – Citizen-funded elections help to break down barriers to participating in our democracy and create a government that looks more like us — and works better for us. Montgomery, Howard, Prince George's, Anne Arundel, and Baltimore counties have all established public financing programs, and Baltimore City will be using their program during the 2024 election cycle. When local governments establish these programs, the policies and laws that follow are more responsive to public needs and less skewed by wealthy special interests. This session, we will continue to work with the Fair Elections Maryland coalition to pass legislation that would provide local jurisdictions that have existing programs the option to expand to cover other local offices. We also continue to work toward establishing a program for the General Assembly.

Constitution, Courts, and Other Initiatives

Protecting our Constitutional Rights – Special interests continue to advance calls for Constitutional Conventions in the states. The call for a federal constitutional convention is a dangerous threat to our democracy. While Common Cause Maryland supports fighting big money in politics, we steadfastly oppose a constitutional convention. We continue to oppose those calling for Constitutional Conventions on any issue.

