

# Legislative Wrap 2015



Common Cause Maryland's legislative agenda came down to the last few hours, and it was certainly a photo finish. With key bills passing just in time, the final picture is clear: this year the legislature made huge strides towards making government work better for Marylanders. The legislature has heard the discontent with how government is functioning and took action – investing in fair elections, opening up access to public information, and expanding access to voting. They demonstrated a willingness do what Congress cannot: Tackle important issues and make government more responsive.

## Campaign Finance

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The Governor and the legislature took the most critical step forward this year: Restoring funding to the Fair Campaign Financing Fund. Next year we look forward to working with Senator Pinsky and Delegate Luedtke to strengthen and expand our state fair-elections program and tightening up loopholes exposed in the last campaign cycle.

- Restored funding to the Fair Campaign Finance Fund, the small-donor matching program for gubernatorial candidates. The legislature strengthened the program by expanding the possible voluntary funding sources and adding strengthening language to keep the program clean (HB485, Gov. Hogan).
- The House passed a resolution that would have required Congress to pass a constitutional amendment to overturn *Citizens United*. Unfortunately, the Senate and House could not resolve differences in the legislation (SJ2, Pinsky/HJ2, Hixson).
- Tightened up reporting requirements for entities making campaign donations and either receiving state contacts or engaged in lobbying (SB767, Conway/HB769, Turner) and established reporting requirements for gubernatorial inaugural events (HB775, Frick).
- Did not pass: requiring shareholder approval of political spending by their corporations (SB153, Raskin/HB885, Platt); reporting of major-donor contributions (SB667, Young/HB185, Carr); strengthening coordination rules (HB1088, Ebersole); and establishing stronger repayment requirements for loans (SB823, Bates).

## Transparency and Accountability

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Maryland took an important step towards more open, transparent government by passing legislation that includes several major updates to the state's Public Information Act. This is the first significant change to the Act since it became law forty-five years ago and is a huge win for open government. Work remains to be done around the open meetings law, procurement reform, and completing the transition to open data.

- Updated the Maryland Public Information Act to ensure that fees and exemptions are not used to deny public access to data and to create an oversight body with authority to mediate disputes regarding MPIA decisions (SB695, Raskin/HB755, Cullison; also SB444, Ready/HB83, Krebs).
- Required agencies to publicly post the contact information for their Public Information Act officer (SB852, Young/HB674, Barron).

- Established a study of the state's procurement process, laying the foundation for future reforms (SB 662, Sen. Ready/Del. Miele).
- Did not pass: strengthening open meetings laws to require agendas in advance of public meetings (HB583, Krebs) and to require subcommittees to hold open meetings (HB264, Krebs).

## Election Protection

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This year saw voting rights strengthened in several important ways. There is more work to do to ensure the transition to new voting machines goes smoothly and to continue the conversation started this year about special elections and automatic voter registration.

- Restored voting rights to roughly 40,000 Marylanders by clarifying existing laws that permit formerly incarcerated persons to vote (SB340, Conway/HB980, McCray).
- Create a process to protect voters from intimidation or harassment as it occurs (SB192, Pinsky/HB73, Rosenberg) and ensure that petition gatherers do not have their efforts undermined by a bad process (SB193, Bates/HB284, Flanagan).
- Did not pass: reforming our process for filling vacant legislative seats so that citizens have a voice (SB166, Feldman/HB604, Moon; HB806, Miele) and shifting voter registration from opt-in to opt-out (HB 1049, Hixson).

## Redistricting Reform

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Governor Hogan set the stage this session when he announced in his State of the State that he would appoint a study commission to change the process by which Maryland draws its district lines. The Executive Order establishing that commission is anticipated after the legislative session ends. In the meantime, no action was taken by the legislature to tackle this critical reform.

- Did not pass: setting standards for Congressional districts to ensure they are compact and respect community lines (SB448, Kelley/HB850, Gutierrez) or establishing a new process for creating those maps (Senator Pinsky; Delegates Afzali, Flanagan, McComas, Miele, and Parrott).

## Public Ethics

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While the House showed a renewed interest in tackling ethics issues no legislation passed the Senate.

- Did not pass: strengthening our revolving-door provisions by ensuring top administrative officials and legislators must wait two years before taking a lobbying position (HB234, Tarlau) and ensuring that legislators who become lobbyists are not making campaign donations from their old campaign accounts (HB518, Carr).

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Common Cause Maryland is a nonpartisan, grassroots organization dedicated to restoring the core values of American democracy, reinventing an open, honest and accountable government that works in the public interest, and empowering ordinary people to make their voices heard. Founded in 1974, Common Cause Maryland is one of the state's most effective watchdog groups and has been a strong force for reform at the state and local levels.

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