

# Life as a Progressive Legislator

**The lesson of fifteen years is that real change requires a people's movement.**

By [Paul G. Pinsky](#)

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I am a Maryland state legislator. A Democrat. A progressive. And I am a worried man.

I left this year's legislative session convinced that the mainstream Democratic Party political vision offers, at best, a torturous, contorted path to the more democratic, sustainable and just future Maryland and the nation deserve. I also left more convinced than ever that adding a few progressives to the Statehouse legislative mix, in and of itself, is not going to make much of a difference.

I serve in what should be the most progressive state government in America. In Maryland, with a Democrat as governor and a hefty majority in both legislative chambers, mainstream Democrats have achieved the sort of statewide political dominance they can only dream about elsewhere in the nation. What has this dominance accomplished? By some measures a good bit. The legislative session before last year's election, for instance, generated a new law that requires trigger locks on all new handguns, the first such mandate in the nation. Legislators also widened children's healthcare coverage and guaranteed prevailing wage rates for school construction projects. The state also stepped in with additional funds for teacher salaries and expanded the earned-income tax credit for low-wage workers. And lawmakers earmarked cigarette litigation funds for smoking prevention, cancer research and education.

Decent achievements? Absolutely. I voted for them all. But a closer look does dim the luster. The trigger-lock legislation, for instance, passed only after a filibuster threat had weakened the original legislation. The expanded child health coverage comes with no guarantee of quality care. Party leaders, meanwhile, pursued precious few policies in the 2000 session that might have energized their natural constituent base—working people—because those steps might also have alienated corporate interests. Except for passage of the state's first antidiscrimination protections for gays and lesbians, the 2001 legislative session was more of the same: no progress on a statewide living wage, no serious expansion of healthcare coverage and defeat of a two-year death-penalty moratorium.

My Democratic Party colleagues think I'm living in political fantasyland. When I suggest that our legislative ambitions could be broader, "scale back" is their advice. "Don't give corporate Maryland any reason to throw its considerable weight fully behind Republicans." Comforting corporate interests is, of course, the essence of Clintonism, and Maryland is perhaps its perfect laboratory.

Maryland, after all, is "America in miniature," as the tourist brochures like to say. The state boasts sophisticated city life, suburbs and rural communities. And the population is diverse: a quarter African-American, almost 5 percent Latino, with a rapidly growing Asian community. To legislate for this miniature America, Maryland legislators serve on a part-time basis, in session only three months a year. But these three months are increasingly frenzied. Twenty years of Reaganism and Clintonism have devolved substantial

authority from the federal to the state level. To a large extent, states now determine which environmental protections get implemented, how welfare operates and whether healthcare regulations get waived.

In the course of making these important decisions, Maryland lawmakers rarely see average working people. The Statehouse halls belong to the power-suited, always-eager-to-be-helpful lobbyists. Most large companies have full-time lobbyists either on payroll or on retainer. If a legislator is confronted with an issue that poses a stark corporate-consumer contrast, you can be sure that a legislator will have heard the corporate side many times over before any vote is taken. Consumer forces, on the other hand, seldom sport any full-time lobbying presence at the state level.

Legislators do, to be sure, hear from constituents on some issues, most notably the hot "social issues," everything from abortion rights to gun control. But there's little likelihood that lawmakers will receive any appreciable quantities of mail on issues like electricity deregulation. And the constituent mail lawmakers do receive on issues like these will, in all likelihood, be stimulated by the industries most directly involved. On any issue where constituents are silent and industry has made its case—a case that usually boils down to "either go along with the corporate solution or risk losing jobs"—the outcome is assured. In state capitals like Annapolis, the good folks do not beat the bad folks on issues that affect the corporate bottom line. The Statehouse is their turf, not ours.

Maryland lobbyists actually tend to spend more of their time battling one another, as gladiators for competing corporate interests, than they do directly battling the interests of average people. Legislative leaders have little patience for this intracorporate squabbling. Work it out, they tell the competing parties. The implicit message: Get together and work out legislation you can all agree on, then we'll pass it.

For corporate Maryland, maintaining this suffocating presence in Annapolis costs. In 1979 only \$3 million was shelled out for lobbying in Annapolis. Nine years later, 545 special interests spent more than triple that amount. By 2000, 924 interests had registered lobbyists, and total lobbying expenditures topped

\$22 million. But these expenditures pay off. Together with private campaign contributions, they have created a corporate culture that permeates every corner of state politics.

For progressive lawmakers, it's tempting to just vote "no" on every flawed bill that this corporate-dominated culture produces, but that's not legislating. To make any impact at all, a lawmaker needs instead to be "part of" the process. So you try to improve the junk that crosses your desk. Meanwhile, you feel your time, your energy and your focus as a progressive slip away.

Constituents understandably want to see immediate improvements in their respective communities. So my progressive colleagues and I do our best to help. We work to gain funding for sound barriers in traffic-packed neighborhoods and to underwrite redevelopment projects in ignored older, often minority communities. We've even had some success promoting solar energy incentives for public buildings, and I've also been able to make some progress on insuring that every classroom gets a quality teacher. Still, the general knock on me, from my more mainstream colleagues, is that I spend too much time on big-picture issues like single-payer healthcare, a statewide living wage and public financing for state election campaigns. If I were willing to compromise more to move up in the legislative leadership, they indirectly suggest, I could achieve far more legislative success. I've always rejected this purely opportunistic approach. But I've also rejected the option of playing the ideological purist. So I walk a fine line.

What have I accomplished? I've thought about that question a great deal lately, ever since I found myself, not too long ago, testifying in the trial of the state's most handsomely compensated lobbyist. The lobbyist was being tried on charges that he had duped his corporate clients out of \$400,000 by, as the *Baltimore Sun* put it, "concocting or exaggerating the threat of legislation" that would have harmed his clients' corporate interests. I was the threat. The lobbyist figured that he could parlay my radical reputation into a hefty personal payday.

He wrote to his paint industry clients that I was about to introduce some major anti-industry legislation, a situation that, if true, would have triggered a higher fee under his contract with the painting interests. Unfortunately for the lobbyist, I never had any such plans, and that's what I testified.

My testimony eventually helped convict this errant lobbyist, and I suppose I should have felt quite good about that. But I didn't become a Maryland state lawmaker fifteen years ago to help catch corrupt corporate lobbyists. I ran to challenge the corporate power that, year in and year out, feeds those lobbyists and rots our democracy. Now here I was helping a defrauded corporate special interest win "justice."

I am now more convinced than ever that "justice" isn't going to come from inside any legislative chambers. Making fundamental change, even change that falls far short of redistributing wealth and power, will only take place if a broad, active, well-organized people's movement emerges.

In Maryland, an effort is now under way to build just such a movement. The newly created group Progressive Maryland aims to organize citizens statewide around a working people's agenda and become the dynamic grassroots force needed to bring such an agenda before the legislature. Progressive Maryland includes a political action arm that will endorse and promote candidates in targeted races. Ideally, the candidates will come from inside Progressive Maryland's own ranks. Candidates from outside the organization who seek an endorsement will be asked to join, to make a commitment to promoting certain key issues and even to participate in regularly scheduled meetings with organization representatives. If promises are broken, the organization will work to unseat the same candidate it helped elect. Progressive Maryland will work between elections, as the Democratic Party should do but doesn't, and strive to mobilize, at workplaces and through door-to-door canvassing, a broad expanse of people around issues of empowerment and economic democracy. At election time Progressive Maryland will provide campaign support for those candidates who take a leading role in advocating for this progressive agenda.

"Where" the electoral work takes place, inside or outside the Democratic Party, remains an open question, dependent on the political dynamics of each area and, most important, on the strength of each area's progressive organizational base. Progressive Maryland's strongest chapter currently is in Montgomery County, Maryland's largest political jurisdiction. In late 1999 Progressive Montgomery narrowly missed passing what would have been the nation's highest living-wage mandate. That fight continues, with another close County Council living-wage vote expected this fall.

Expanding Progressive Montgomery's effort statewide would bolster those of us lawmakers promoting a progressive agenda in Annapolis. One or two or four well-meaning, left-leaning senators, or a dozen House members, aren't strong enough to counter the current gaggle of corporate lobbyists and their industries. But Progressive Maryland could change that equation. Mobilizing 10,000 people—voters—onto the state Capitol steps would go a long way toward building momentum for much-needed change.

Activists in other states have, over the past two decades, worked to build statewide organizations somewhat similar to Progressive Maryland. LEAP in Connecticut, the New Party and others have explored different versions of this accountability model, and second-generation organizations like the Working Families Party in New York are continuing the effort. Groups in states like Vermont and Minnesota are all helping this work along, bringing together, as we've done in Maryland, local labor unions and state labor councils, religious and community organizations and their rank-and-file members, as well as unaffiliated individuals. The basic strategy: Unite institutions and individuals who believe in a progressive agenda into a multiracial membership organization with enough resources to make it self-sustaining for the long haul. All this action in Maryland and elsewhere is heartening, but most states are nowhere close to creating a viable, mass-based, progressive organization. That leaves huge numbers of activists who embrace a progressive vision and are attracted to electoral politics with no effective organization to act as a guide or anchor. Having such organizations, I've come to believe, is absolutely essential to making progressive social change. Individual progressive lawmakers will never be truly heard until their voices are rooted, mainstreamed in an

organizational base. By mainstreaming I don't mean watering down what progressives have to say. What I mean is that we need to connect the work of progressive elected officials directly to viable grassroots organizations. Only broad public support can propel progressive initiatives into mainstream political discourse. But progressive lawmakers will only be able to build that support if they can count on a strong organizational base.

Progressive elected leaders come and go. To build an effective progressive agenda, we need organizations that stick around. Without such organizations, progressive lawmakers, no matter how politically well meaning, remain exposed to legislative dynamics that may, and usually will, throw them deeply off their original progressive course.

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