

# A Look Back & A Look Forward: From New Orleans to Toronto!

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Co-Chairs of the 2016 COGEL Conference Program Committee



After another year of extensive planning and amazing contributions from COGEL members, we are excited to say that the 2016 COGEL conference in New Orleans was a wonderful success! Attendees enjoyed a wide array of informative table topic discussions and breakout sessions, including four plenary presentations, as well as a number of valuable networking opportunities. We were also thrilled to once again see more than 400 of our COGEL colleagues come together, and we were further pleased to welcome many first-time attendees to the conference.

Regardless of your COGEL discipline, the 2016 conference had something for you. The diversity of topics and presenters at the conference showcased COGEL's commitment to both its always popular sessions in the fields of campaign finance, ethics, elections, lobbying, and freedom of information, in addition to emerging topics such as government agencies' use of social media platforms such as Twitter. As preparations begin on the 2017 conference in Toronto, know that we will continue to build upon and grow our conference offerings to ensure you get the most out of your four day experience.

Located in the heart of downtown Toronto, the Sheraton Centre Hotel will host the 2017 conference from December 3-6. Mark your calendars now – you won't want to miss everything we have to offer this year! The conference will highlight the ongoing efforts, successes, and innovations within the COGEL disciplines, but perhaps more significantly will once again provide a unique space for the sharing of ideas and the formation of new professional relationships. The 2016 conference encouraged colleague interaction through many of its panel sessions, breakfast table topic discussions, and through the introduction of COGEL Dine-Arounds, where attendees could network with each other while enjoying the culinary scene of the city. We are eager to bring all of these opportunities to Toronto!



During the 2016 conference in New Orleans, we saw the “politics of money and influence” serve as a running theme throughout the plenary sessions. The conference opened with *Washington Post* national political reporter Matea Gold sharing her experiences covering the role of Super PACs, billionaire donors, and dark money in the 2016 elections. Attendees were able to learn how Gold uses her reporting to “Follow the Money” and investigate the flow of money into politics. This session was followed by Nick Penniman and Wendell Potter discussing their book, *Nation on the Take: How Big Money Corrupts Our Democracy & What We Can Do About It*. The authors explored the corrupt, “coin operated” nature of American democracy, but left attendees with a proposed plan for improvement and optimism for the future. This plenary was followed by a VIP panel of three U.S. Congressmen and a former FEC Chairman who discussed in frank, stark terms just how the constant focus on fundraising affects Congress and the legislative process.

Later, we gained a rare glimpse into the abrupt dismantling of the Wisconsin Government Accountability Board during a candid interview with its former Executive Director, Kevin Kennedy. The insights Kennedy shared imparted the tough role a regulating agency has and the difficult relationship that can exist between it and the officials it regulates. Finally, an exclusive screening of Alexandra Pelosi’s documentary *Meet the Donors: Does Money Talk?* shed light on mega-donors and their big money contributions to political campaigns. A follow-up discussion moderated by FEC Commissioners Ann Ravel and Ellen Weintraub helped to further drive home this overarching theme.

In addition to these four rich and varied plenary discussions on the politics of money and influence, the 2016 conference offered 45 breakout sessions on topics ranging from how to spot embezzlement and personal use of campaign funds to how data mining tools can promote compliance. In addition, attendees gathered to discuss a myriad of issues at the ever-popular Breakfast Table Topics. Finally, COGEL was very pleased to honor Nedda Gold Massar with the Outstanding Service Award and FEC Commissioner Ann Ravel with the 2017 COGEL Award--two well-deserved honors for two incredibly amazing women who have given so much to the profession. Congrats to them both!

The planning of the 2017 Toronto conference has already begun! The Program Committee, co-chaired by Wesley Bizzell of Altria Client Services and Melanie Martin-Griem of Elections Ontario, is working hard to raise the bar and keep the conference as engaging and informative as ever. Have ideas for potential breakout sessions or connections to potential speakers? Let us know! We are always looking for new ideas and suggestions, just e-mail Wes (Wesley.Bizzell@altria.com) or Melanie ([melanie.martin-griem@elections.on.ca](mailto:melanie.martin-griem@elections.on.ca)). Also, be sure to check out the COGEL conference website (<http://www.cogel.org/mpage/2017ConferenceHome>) for more information about the 2017 COGEL conference, our host hotel, and Toronto.

We look forward to seeing you at the 2017 conference in Toronto!