Flash!

Transparency victory in California

MapLight is proud to share the news of a major public access victory, one whose effects we hope will reverberate across the nation: as of Labor Day 2013, Californians are finally able to download the latest information on who is funding their elected officials, in one bulk file, every day from the Secretary of State's website.

For too long, basic civic questions such as "How much has company X given to lawmakers?" have been impossibly time-intensive for Californians to answer, as the state's campaign finance data has only been available online for one committee at a time. Access to the bulk data has only been possible by requesting a CD-ROM copy of the database, which can take up to two weeks to receive in the mail —even as, during election season, millions of dollars are raised and spent every day to influence results.

Not only does this system preclude timely, comprehensive analysis of the ways campaign contributions affect democracy, it is woefully inefficient: as MapLight's President and Co-Founder Daniel G. Newman explained, "It takes a hundred times more work for the state to put up their current searchable website than to make the raw data available for download, and the raw data is in many ways more useful."

MapLight decided that Californians need and deserve better. Partnering with the grassroots advocacy group California Common Cause, we spearheaded a campaign to urge California Secretary of State Debra Bowen to

California Secretary of State Debra Bowen and MapLight President Daniel G. Newman. Credit: California Secretary of State/MapLight

provide the public twenty-first century access to this crucial data. A broad coalition of media, transparency, and reform groups signed their names to our letter to Secretary Bowen, which asked her office to upload a copy of California's campaign finance database daily to a publicly-accessible website, where it can be accessed in a single file by

Tracking money in California made simple with MapLight Power Search

Search contributions to

California Candidates

(Change to COMMITTEES)

Donor

Organization or individual

Recipient(s)

◉ Anyone

◯ These candidates...

◯ Candidates by office...

Location

From state

NY, CA, etc.

Date

Start date

yyyy-mm-dd

End date

yyyy-mm-dd

Run

Run Query

Honing in on influence is easier than ever with MapLight Power Search.

Now that bulk campaign finance data for California is available online (see above), MapLight has released a new tool for unearthing key findings from the raw numbers.

Our MapLight Power Search tool will help citizens and journalists speedily surface campaign contributions to California candidate and ballot committees dating back to 2001. Investigators can search for money by donor, recipient, and geographic origin, as well as filter contributions by date, and view and sort the results right in their browser. For deeper analysis or mash-ups with other data sets, search results can be downloaded as spreadsheet files.

MapLight Power Search is currently in beta, with additional functionalities to be announced soon. We would love to know what you think—as well as any compelling information you find—so please give it a try at http://maplight.org/california/power-search.

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any citizen or member of the media.

Despite the widespread backing for this commonsense reform, the Secretary of State's office initially failed to embrace it: in a response to our letter, Secretary Bowen wrote that posting a more comprehensive file was not feasible, since the bulk data includes information such as street addresses and bank account numbers that is illegal to post online and that she claimed her office lacked the resources to filter out. Yet with MapLight's track record of working with multiple complex data sets to reveal useful information to the public, we knew our data team could build an automated, low-cost fix to surmount this concern.

With proposed solution in hand, Newman and California Common Cause Policy Advocate Phillip Ung journeyed to Sacramento. In a meeting with Secretary Bowen's senior staff, they further made the case that ongoing and effective accountability for California lawmakers and their contributors demands that the public have improved access to campaign finance records, and Newman offered MapLight's technical expertise in developing a filtering protocol for the bulk data.

Just days after the sit-down, the announcement came: the California Secretary of State's office would make the state's entire campaign finance database available for download in one file, reversing their earlier denial. Furthermore, Secretary Bowen pledged that the downloadable file would be updated twice daily with new records. "Once the raw format of the data is also available daily through our website, anyone with the technological expertise can write their own tracking program," she said in a statement.

"Great credit goes to Secretary Bowen for recognizing the importance of this data set, and I hope this sets the precedent for other states across the nation," Newman said. "It's not just a small feature that she's adding—it's a quantum leap forward for transparency."

This important reform, a major victory for MapLight's work and for democracy in the state of California, was a collective effort. Thank you to our partner California Common Cause and to the other co-signers of our original request: Around the Capitol, the California Newspaper Publishers Association, California Forward, Courage Campaign, Global Exchange, the Los Angeles Times, Rootstrikers, the Sacramento Bee, the Sunlight Foundation, and California State Senator Leland Yee. We are proud to have worked with you all to further a more transparent and accountable country.

SPOTLIGHT: New MapLight team members

Jan Masaoka, Board Member, is a leading writer and thinker on nonprofit organizations, with decades of experience consulting to nonprofits on boards, finance, and strategy. She is the CEO of the California Association of Nonprofits, which works to "bring the full power of California nonprofits to strengthening communities," and is the founder and publisher of the nonprofit online magazine Blue Avocado. Jan is a nine-time designee as one of the nonprofit sector's "Fifty Most Influential People" and in 2003 was named "Nonprofit Executive of the Year" by Nonprofit Times.

Michelle Romero, Advisory Board Member, is director of the Claiming Our Democracy program at the Greenlining Institute, overseeing voting rights, elections policy, and ballot initiative reform efforts. In 2010, she led the organization's statewide campaign to engage communities of color in California's first-ever citizen-driven redistricting process. Michelle holds a B.A. from UC Santa Cruz.

Kim Scott, Advisory Board Member, was a faculty member at Apple University and, prior to that, ran AdSense, YouTube, and Doubleclick Online Sales and Operations at Google. Kim co-founded Juice Software, a business intelligence software platform, where she was the CEO. Kim also worked as a senior policy advisor at the FCC. She is a graduate of Harvard Business School.

Michael Canning, Program Assistant, aids our data and web teams with research, data management, and administrative support. He received his B.A. in Political Science from American University.

Mettabel Law, Development Assistant, aids our development efforts with grantwriting, communications, and administration. She received a B.A. with high distinction in Rhetoric and Ethnic Studies from UC Berkeley.

Miriam Marks, Data Manager, curates MapLight's bill research data and contributes to other data projects. She received an M.A. and B.A. with Honors in Public Policy and a minor in Economics from Stanford University.

Sarang Shah, Program Assistant, helps collect, assess, and analyze data and provides administrative support. He has attended the University of Cambridge, Trinity College Dublin, and the Georgia Institute of Technology.

How to end secret money, without passing a law

Credit: Free Press

What a bittersweet milestone to hear President Obama finally announce two nominees for the Federal Election Commission, Virginia attorney Lee E. Goodman and California Fair Political Practices Commission Chair Ann Ravel—two months after the last Federal Election Commissioner's term expired. At that point, out of six seats on the FEC, one seat had gone vacant for months, and every remaining commissioner had been serving an expired term. And we're not talking about weeks or months: FEC Chair Ellen Weintraub's term, for example, expired in April 2007.

What is holding things up? President Obama could, if he wished, appoint new commissioners to all six FEC seats. (No more than three commissioners can be from one party, and appointments are subject to Senate confirmation.) Obama could choose commissioners who actually want to enforce the law, clearing a path to progress, at last, on regulations to end secret money. (See Trevor Potter's piece in the Washington Post, "How the FEC can stop the tidal wave of secret political cash.")

Fixing the FEC is the "low-hanging fruit" of the money and politics movement.

Neither Citizens United nor other Supreme Court decisions require campaign contributions to be kept secret. Rather, these court decisions interact with existing law to create giant loopholes that led to the flood of dark money in recent elections. Several times, even with Democratic majorities in the House and Senate, Congress failed to pass the DISCLOSE Act, which would have ended the secrecy of campaign contributions. Now, with Republicans controlling the House, there is no chance for disclosure legislation passing in Congress.

But these loopholes aren't immutable: the FEC also has the power to compel disclosure of all contributions. This wouldn't make the unlimited spending go away, but it would make this spending public and transparent, an essential step forward.

In 2007 Obama said, "As president, I will appoint nominees to the Commission who are committed to enforcing our nation's election laws." Then why, in 2013, are there still commissioners serving past their terms on the FEC?

The absence of organized political pressure has allowed Obama to serve four years as President while appointing merely two of the six new commissioners the FEC needs. (One nomination, made in 2009, was later withdrawn.) Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and a handful of other groups have spotlighted the problem, but this is just the beginning. What is desperately needed is a well-resourced, organized campaign with a broad coalition of groups involved.

A one-year national campaign, requiring only a fraction of the resources of a campaign to pass a national law, would be enough to create the public pressure necessary to drive Obama to finish what he has now started and appoint the remaining commissioners. With the opportunity for an easy win with modest resources—not to mention the chance to end secret money—this is one of the best investments our movement could make.

Obama has taken an important step in nominating Goodman and Ravel, but it's not enough. Are we going to wait for a new president to appoint the remaining commissioners? Or are we as a movement going to put the pressure on now, when we have a president who is already favorably inclined, a president who understands the issue—a president who for eight years served on the board of directors of the Joyce Foundation, with its longtime support of money and politics reform?

In forty years, there has never been more public disgust with the corrupting influence of money on politics. The public is with us in spirit. But to build the movement, we need wins. Ending secret money would be a big national win, and the only national win on the one-year horizon right now. Will we as a movement seize this rare opportunity, or let it pass?

Dan Newman

Want to hear more insights from Daniel on the money and politics movement? Follow his new blog at http://danielgnewman.com.

U.S. Congress contributions data provided by the Center for Responsive Politics (OpenSecrets.org) and the Federal Election Commission (FEC.gov) and legislative data provided by GovTrack.us. California contributions data provided by the National Institute on Money in State Politics (FollowTheMoney.org). Wisconsin contributions data provided by the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign (WisDC.org).

Flash! A NEWSLETTER FROM MAPLIGHT

PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER USING SOY-BASED INKS

Our data gets Hack[ed]4Good

MapLight's Jay Costa (left) working with our Hack4Good crew. Credit: Fumi Yamakazi

In just 24 hours, the talented participants in Google's second-ever Hack-4Good challenge laid the foundation for MapLight to accelerate our output of money and politics data to journalists and the public.

Hack4Good gathers programmers and coders to help a select few nonprofits amplify their impact by addressing their web development needs. After three application rounds, including a video pitch from our board co-chair (and former Google marketing director) Doug Edwards, MapLight won a place in this year's event.

We asked the Hack4Good team to help us expand access to MapLight's Money and Politics Data Set, the most up-to-date, comprehensive federal campaign finance data set currently available, launched last fall. Currently, much of the data is only available upon request from our staff, as the data set's enormous size of over 30 million records exceeds the capabilities of many formats typically used for posting data online.

After working for a day straight, our talented crew produced an impressive search tool that will not only allow journalists and citizens to directly query the database and download their filtered results, but will also enhance the speed of our internal research. MapLight is currently hard at work readying this prototype for public launch. Many thanks to the Google Hack4Good team for their hard work!

A stronger, faster MapLight—thanks to you!

Credit: Kjetil Korslien

MapLight would be nothing without our generous supporters, and we are careful to put every dollar we receive to the best use possible. Here are just a few of the recent investments we have made with your donations in order to maximize our impact in the fight for a fair democracy:

- a more powerful server, allowing us to process money and politics queries up to a thousand times faster than before

- a cloud-based web server that can increase our website traffic capacity by thousands more visitors

- content distribution network storage for many of our downloadable data files, so that an unlimited number of users can download the files without any slowdown

- redesigned internal network hardware, file storage, and back-up systems to help our staff work more efficiently (and economically)