

Guide to **MONEY** in **POLITICS**

By Dennis Osorio

**Research
Tools for
Issue
Campaigns**



Introduction

Time and again, community organizing groups have found that winning campaigns with an impact on everyday people's lives frequently means challenging corporate power. All too often, companies attempt to undermine the public interest using their undue influence over our decision-makers. This guide contains an overview of some of the leading organizations from around the country that are engaged in unearthing and combating the influence of money in the political process.

For each organization contained within this guide, grassroots groups will find a description of the organization's role in the landscape, an overview of the resources made available, and some examples of how those resources have been put into action by grassroots organizations.

Why Look at Money in Politics?

There is more opportunity now than ever for organizing groups to fight corporate influence in politics. Incidents such as the oil spill in the Gulf, union-busting and the events in Wisconsin, and bank foreclosure practices, have led more and more people to wake up to the fact that there is a battle raging between the rich and everyone else. A Gallup poll released in February, 2011 backs this up. A large majority of people in the U.S.—67 percent—are dissatisfied with the size and influence of corporations. This number has been climbing steadily since 2007.

Confronting Money in Politics

There are a number of ways that organizations challenge the role of money in politics.

Examples include:

- Hitting industry lobby days,
- Distributing fact sheets to shame politicians,
- Feeding information to journalists,
- Advertisements that expose corporate attempts to protect their bottom lines at our expense via public policy, and
- Releasing research reports at public events.

Looking Beyond Campaign Contributions

The influence of corporate money in politics goes way beyond campaign contributions. Like the blogger who impersonated billionaire David Koch for a conversation with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, money in politics is usually about gaining access to a lawmaker's ear.

Here are some other examples:

Variety of contributions: company dollars flow to campaigns in a variety of ways, such as from executives, company political action committees, and trade associations.

Revolving door: when legislators, staffers, and regulators shuttle back and forth between the private and public sectors, incentives are created for decision-makers to undermine strong laws and regulations of corporate practices with the expectation of lucrative employment in the future.

Outside spending or independent expenditures: long-held rules limiting the role of corporate funding in political campaigns were rolled back by the 2010 *Citizens United* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. This allows corporations to spend as much money as they want to help political candidates win elections. Political spending by corporations that occur outside of election campaigns should be monitored closely.

Lobbyists: companies may have armies of lobbyists deployed across the country whose goal is to gain access to lawmakers.

Fundraisers: political fundraisers are frequently held by a politician's rich supporters. Sometimes this includes corporations, their executives or PACs, or trade associations. Not only is this a productive source of funding for a politician, but a great way to ensure access by the host.

Meetings: appointment books illustrate who lawmakers make time to meet with.

When conducting research on the role of money in politics, here are few things to look for:

Out-of-district: are campaigns being funded from out-of-district or even out-of-state donors? If so, the politician can be placed on the defensive and should be forced to identify who they really represent.

Strategic giving: rather than focusing on dollar amounts, it can be more illuminating to think about who receives money. Companies have the resources to strategically target donations to lawmakers who sit on committees that have the power to shape a bill that might impact company profits.

Earmarks: are politicians submitting federal earmarks that benefit the same companies that have given them contributions?

Donors that "smell" wrong: see if large political contributions are being reporting from multiple people with the same address or from those with no prior history of political giving.

Research & Data Resources for Money in Politics Work

NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON MONEY IN STATE POLITICS

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Role in the Landscape

The Institute is the only organization collecting information about campaign contributions at the state level. They capture state-wide races such as state senators, governors, attorney generals, and ballot measures. This is done for all 50 states. They are primarily a transparency/data organization, but are eager to support grassroots groups, journalists, and individuals wanting to make use of their resources.

Resources They Provide

The Institute makes its campaign-finance database available online at: <http://www.followthemoney.org/>. The database tracks contributions made to statewide candidates, ballot measures, and party committees in each state. Groups can download much of this contribution data and work with it themselves or use several different tools:

My district: lists statewide candidates representing a given address, identifies their contributors, donors based within the district, and provides the district's voting record.

Point of Influence: maps where contributions come from, determines the influence of out-of-district or out-of-state money.

Industry Influence: uses a drill-down technique to find money contributed by particular industries.

Timeline: shows political donations using two graphs; one graph contains cumulative values, and the other shows totals for a given day.

L-Cat: identifies who sits in a given committee and who funds them; helps illustrate the strategic nature of a company's or an industry's political donations, possibly to the committees that oversee them or have the power to pass, squash, or shape particular pieces of legislation that might impact their bottom line.

Lobbyist Link: shows the total number of lobbyists in a given state; can filter by company or industry; does not show lobbying expenditures.

Pulse: produces scatter plot graphs summarizing winning and losing candidates' campaign spending.

(m)c50: measures a state or district based on whether races are considered competitive.

External websites: widgets and an API (application programming interface) are made available for bringing data from <http://followthemoney.org/> to other websites.

CENTER FOR RESPONSIVE POLITICS

Contact Information

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Role in the Landscape

Center for Responsive Politics operates one of the most prominent money-in-politics websites. OpenSecrets.org contains federal data that includes campaign contributions, outside spending by independent interest groups, lobbyists, revolving door issues, earmarks, and the personal finances of members of Congress and other federal officials.



MOOSE

Monied Out-of-State Executives

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Posing as MOOSE (Monied Out-of-State Executives), members of the Maine People's Alliance held a "press conference" in March 2011 thanking Maine Governor Paul LePage for giving them such a good return on their investment in his campaign. The MOOSE praised LePage for his quick work in "working to strip away health care coverage, decimate the state's environmental protections and destroy Maine's labor unions" in just his first two months in office.

Resources They Provide

The entry point for the following resources is:
<http://opensecrets.org/>.

Donor and candidate campaign finance: from the home page, you can simply enter a candidate's name and quickly get campaign contribution information.

Outside spending: spending by organizations not directly associated with political parties represented over half of all federal campaign spending in 2010. This portal page lists the groups engaged in outside spending, dollar amounts, and the candidates affected by this spending;
<http://www.opensecrets.org/outsidespending/>.

Lobbying database: find lobbying activity by client company, lobbyist, or by an industry; this contains reported lobbying expenses; <http://www.opensecrets.org/lobby/>.

Revolving door: this contains revolving door data based on individuals or companies (including regulatory bodies like the Security and Exchange Commission);
<http://www.opensecrets.org/revolving/>.

Earmarks: this contains detailed earmark information and users can explore how specific companies or organizations may have donated money to a legislator responsible for giving that company or organization an earmark; <http://www.opensecrets.org/earmarks/>.

Personal finances: users of this tool are given a range estimating a lawmaker's net worth. It also shows their stock holdings, lines of credit, and real estate transactions, <http://www.opensecrets.org/pfds/>.

External websites: an API (application programming interface) is made available for bringing data from <http://opensecrets.org/> to other websites.

PUBLIC CAMPAIGN

Contact Information

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Teaming Up with Health Care for America Now!

During the push for federal health care reform, Public Campaign worked with Health Care for America Now! (HCAN) to create a series of print, TV and, web ads exposing the private insurance industry's bad practices and excessive greed. The ads made clear that if the insurance companies won and got their way in shaping health care reform, the American people would lose.

The two groups also created profiles of 80 members of Congress that detailed private industry contributions, revolving door issues, fundraising events, and any scandals associated with fundraising. This information was critical in creating the public materials showing how the industry or a company was using profits to influence policy.

Source: Center for Responsive Politics

Role in the Landscape

Public Campaign conducts campaigns to improve campaign finance laws and to promote public financing of elections. They offer research and messaging support to community organizations, focusing on connecting the dots between how elected officials raise money and the actions they take that hurt regular people.

Resources They Provide

Fair facts, voter blog and press room: all contain information about clean elections, including their success in states and cities that have adopted Fair Election laws, the status of federal clean money legislation, a link list of organizations studying the role of money in politics, research reports, and analysis of the news.

Research support: Public Campaign offers rapid response research on breaking news stories, including lobbying, campaign finance, and fundraising events for community groups. They conduct background strategic research to help with organizations' campaigns, media strategy, and outreach. In addition, Public Campaign compares the disclosure forms of members of Congress with their position statements, searching for conflicts of interest. For example, comparing a lawmaker's statements about global warming with their relationships to oil companies.

COMMON CAUSE

Contact Information

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Role in the Landscape

Common Cause is a membership-based organizing group that operates in 36 states. Campaign finance reform is one of their key issues. They have worked on presidential public financing, banning soft money, the Honest Leadership and Open Government Act, and establishing an independent Office of Congressional Ethics.

Earmarks for Campaign Cash?

Common Cause took a close look at the earmarks inserted by members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense and released a public report of their findings titled "Earmarks for Campaign Cash?" They discovered that in the 2008 defense spending bill, these earmarks totaled more than \$355 million dollars. Digging a little deeper, Common Cause found that those who benefited most from these earmarks just happened to be the same companies who had contributed \$1.3 million to the Subcommittee members' election campaigns. A terrific return on these political investments made by corporations!

Resources They Provide

Common Blog, Take Action, and Research Center: all contain information about money in politics, government accountability, election reform, and media reform.

Money in Politics: contains information about Fair Elections, the DISCLOSE Act (to require disclosure in political ads by outside groups), presidential public financing, clean elections in states, and more; <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=4764307>

Activist Kit: contains information on how and when to lobby, an overview of the legislative process, and contacting elected officials; <http://www.commoncause.org/activistkit>.

Research Center: contains reports on various issues including money in politics, election reform, and media and democracy; <http://www.commoncause.org/site/pp.asp?c=dkLNK1MQIwG&b=4773601>.

MapLight.org

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Executive Director
Daniel Newman

Role in the Landscape

MapLight.org tracks the influence of money in the U.S. Congress as well as in California and Wisconsin. Their research team and free online tools shed light on the connections between political inputs (such as campaign contributions) and political outputs (such as legislation). Their data partners include the Center for Responsive Politics, GovTrack, National Institute on Money in State Politics, and the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

Resources They Provide

MapLight.org combines three types of information: campaign finance data, legislative voting data, and support or opposition by interest groups. The entry point for the following resources is: <http://maplight.org/us-congress/guide/tools>.

Legislative data: shows detailed records of bills, votes, and legislators for the U.S. Congress, California, and Wisconsin; <http://maplight.org/us-congress/bill>.

Campaign finance data: provides a search tool that shows campaign contributions for legislators in the U.S. Congress, California, or Wisconsin; <http://maplight.org/us-congress/contributions>.

Total contributions: compares campaign contributions from interest groups that support a bill with contributions from interests groups in opposition.

Contributions by vote: based on a specific bill or amendment, this tool correlates interest group contributions with how lawmakers vote.

Organization/industry bill position: shows whether companies, unions, trade associations and non-profit groups support or oppose bills.

Timeline of contributions: shows when campaign contributions were received in relation to a vote.

MapLight Resources in Action

Remote Control Reports: examined all campaign contributions given to members of the U.S. House of Representatives from January 2005 through December 2007 to determine the geographic sources of contributions to each legislator. The report found that, on average, 79% of campaign contributions came from outside of members' districts; <http://maplight.org/remotecomontrol08>

External websites: an API (application programming interface) is made available for bringing data from <http://maplight.org/> to other websites.



All the Foreclosures Money Can Buy

Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment (ACCE) commissioned MapLight.org to provide research for a project titled, "All the Foreclosures Money Can Buy: How Wall Street is Spending Millions to Buy Influence in California." The data MapLight.org provided eventually became part of the headline of an article in the L.A. Times: "The \$70 million spent in California on lobbying fees and political contributions came at the same time the banks were getting billions in federal taxpayer bailouts to keep them from collapsing."

The report can be downloaded from: <http://www.homedefendersleague.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/AlltheForeclosures.pdf>

SUNLIGHT FOUNDATION

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Role in the Landscape

Like MapLight.org, the Sunlight Foundation is a technology-oriented group that connects their own federal data (lobbyists and fundraisers) with other sources such as <http://opensecrets.org/> and <http://followthemoney.org/>. Sunlight does not take positions on campaign finance reform or other issues. They are, however, very interested in training and supporting grassroots groups on the tools they offer.

The Sunlight Foundation provides funding for the creation of “cutting-edge tools to enable the media, bloggers and citizens to sift, share and combine government data in ways that are useful for them.”

Resources They Provide

Lobbying tracker: allows one to search for lobbyists, their clients, issues lobbied about, and lobbyist registration forms. There is also a “Post-Employment” tracker that shows when federal lawmakers and high-ranking staffers can legally begin to lobby their old colleagues; <http://reporting.sunlightfoundation.com/lobbying/>.

Party time: allows the user to search for political fundraisers based on a legislator or host. Information about fundraisers held by committees and leadership PACs are also available; <http://politicalpartytime.org/>.

Follow the unlimited money: tracks outside spending that benefits Congressional committees who have filed with the FEC that they intend to accept contributions of unlimited amounts. This includes the purpose of the spending such as advertisements and mailers; <http://reporting.sunlightfoundation.com/independent-expenditures/>.

Transparency data: combines the data from <http://opensecrets.org/> and <http://followthemoney.org/> to information collected by Sunlight Foundation. This includes campaign contributions, earmarks, lobbying, grants, and contracts; <http://transparencydata.com/>.

Poligraph: a website and bookmark utility that allows users to simply paste the URL or text of a news article, blog post or press release and receive an enhanced view of the people, organizations and relationships described within it; <http://poligraph.com/>.

Open congress: merges government data with news and blog coverage, and contributions by industry; <http://www.opencongress.org/>.

House of Representatives disbursements: details the spending of various offices in the House of Representatives, including those of Representatives themselves; <http://sunlightfoundation.com/projects/expenditures/>.

White House visitor logs: visitor logs to the White House with links to <http://opensecrets.org/> and <http://followthemoney.org/> (to provide contribution information) for each visitor; <http://sunlightfoundation.com/WhiteHouseVisitors/>.

Open government: contains state, city and local level information for the following states with more forthcoming: California, Louisiana, Maryland, Texas and Wisconsin. Allows users to track bills, votes, legislators, committees, interest group ratings for each legislator, and industry donations; <http://opengovernment.org/>.

Reporting group: is a blog with interesting stories that Sunlight Foundation has uncovered; <http://reporting.sunlightfoundation.com/blog/>

External websites: widgets via Politiwidgets, <http://politiwidgets.com/>, and an API (application programming interface) are made available for bringing data from <http://sunlightfoundation.com/> to other websites.

GOOD JOBS FIRST

Contact Information

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Role in the Landscape

Good Jobs First focuses on corporate subsidies and works to promote corporate and government accountability around subsidies, economic development, and smart growth. They work with organizations by providing research, training, communications and consulting assistance.

Resources They Provide

Accountable USA: overviews of key subsidy programs in each state with cost figures and recipient information; <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/accountable-usa>.

Subsidy tracker: A search engine that allows the user to search whether a company receives subsidies with details made available; <http://subsidytracker.org/>.

Corporate subsidy watch: provides case studies on subsidies for companies and industries; <http://www.goodjobsfirst.org/corporate-subsidy-watch>.

Wal-Mart subsidy watch: Subsidy tracking specific to Wal-Mart; <http://www.walmartsubsidywatch.org/>.

Corporate research project: contains reports about corporate responsibility issues for public distribution and a guide for doing corporate research online; <http://www.corp-research.org/>

Dirt diggers digest: a blog centered on corporate misbehavior and how to research it; <http://dirtiggersdigest.org/dirtiggersdigest.org/>

GJF Resources in Action

Good Jobs First has worked with a range of organizations, including:

- Tax and budget groups who are concerned about the impact of subsidies and money not being available for social services,
- Unions who have wanted to research union-busting companies to see if they are receiving subsidies, and
- Equity groups concerned with low-income areas not having their fair share of good-paying jobs.



Disinfecting Banker's Day on the Hill

In February 2011, on "Bankers' Day on the Hill," grassroots organization Washington Community Action Network confronted corporate bank lobbyists head-on. Lobbyists had descended on the Capitol to try and dissuade lawmakers from voting for a bill that would eliminate outdated tax breaks for Wall Street banks and raise revenue for a state facing a \$5.6 billion budget deficit. Washington CAN! members donning Hazmat suits, surgical masks, and protective goggles patrolled the Capitol and handed out "lobbyist disinfectant kits" to legislators so they could protect themselves from lobbyist germs of misinformation.

Video of the event can be found at: http://youtu.be/HZljc6_OYuo.

PROJECT VOTE SMART

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Role in the Landscape

Project Vote Smart (PVS) is a transparency/data organization with a vast collection of data on candidates and incumbents. Their website, <http://votesmart.org/>, allows users to search at the presidential, congressional, gubernatorial and state legislative levels.

Resources They Provide

Voting records: shows how lawmakers voted on the issues.

Biographical & contact information: contains contact and biographical information for federal and state political candidates, including previous professions, education, families, and organizational memberships.

Issue positions: contains responses from candidates based on a questionnaire, the Political Courage Test. Issue areas include: abortion; budget, spending, and taxes; campaign finance and government reform; crime; education; employment; environment; gun control; health issues; poverty; and legislative priorities.

Interest group ratings: summarizes evaluations from over 150 interest groups, from conservative to liberal.

Public statements: contains speeches and public comments from lawmakers; visitors can type in a word, like 'immigration' and all public utterances containing the word 'immigration' will appear.



Hitting the Jackpot

In a state known for excess and wealth that does not extend to most of its residents, the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN) dug up the dirt on political campaign contributions. PLAN published three reports, one of which they titled the "Jackpot Report," because they had found a stash of money politicians had been hiding from public record. Another report, "Judicial Jackpot," revealed who was giving money to Supreme Court justices. The report, along with newspaper ads on hidden election finances, forced the legislature to hold hearings on public financing. Eventually, legislation requiring disclosure of campaign finances was passed. Jackpot!

Campaign finances: contains summary information for federal races with links from the Center for Responsive Politics (opensecrets.org) and links for statewide races from the National Institute on Money in State Politics (followthemoney.org).

Judicial branch: contains biographical information and opinions for judges and justices at the Supreme Court, courts of appeals, and district courts.

CongressTrack: provides copies and status of key legislation.

Publications: PVS produces two major publications, The Voter's Self-Defense Manual and the Reporter's Source Book. The Voter's Self-Defense Manual contains summary information about Members of Congress and is updated every two years in time for each general election. The Reporter's Source Book contains an overview of major national issues and a directory of sources useful to journalists such as issue organizations, think tanks, academic experts, and federal agencies.

Ballot measures: containing descriptions of state ballot measures, including the complete text, sponsors, and election results.

External websites: widgets and an API (application programming interface) are made available for bringing data from <http://votesmart.org/> to other websites.

Additional Case Studies

DEMOCRACY NORTH CAROLINA

Democracy North Carolina released a series of “Highway Robbery” reports available at <http://www.barryyeoman.com/highway.html>. They uncovered that members of a highway board moved projects that benefited them personally. This led to a series of resignations and reforms. In this case, this was a tag team effort with journalists conducting the investigative reporting and Democracy North Carolina researching the financing of campaigns.

Additionally, Democracy North Carolina exposed a case where a nursing home operator was found illegally financing the campaigns of state lawmakers who had the power to regulate the reimbursement rates the nursing home received. This all started with a series of donations that looked suspicious, from people making \$4,000 donations who had no prior history of political contributions. Upon closer inspection, it was found that the nursing home operator had gotten some cashier’s checks, put his employees’ names on them and sent them in. Because he had mixed up the addresses of his employees (the same street address in different cities), Democracy North Carolina telephoned the employees who denied any knowledge of political donations. This was published in a report and released to newspapers. The nursing home operator was subsequently convicted of campaign finance fraud.

CONNECTICUT CITIZEN ACTION GROUP

CCAG has used money in politics dirt to escalate a fight against waste incinerators, which spew toxins into the air. CCAG discovered that key senators had received donations from the industry around the time of a close vote. Although the sums weren’t large, the mere fact of taking the money looked bad for the electeds involved. CCAG followed up with public actions, such as holding a “bake sale” to send one of their members to a targeted politician’s fundraiser, just like the incinerator industry was able to do.

What worked wasn’t just the numbers themselves—it was finding ways to use them creatively, getting them repeated, and building the narrative. However, Tom Swan of CCAG points out that sometimes groups don’t need to (or may not want to) release campaign dirt numbers publicly. For example, in one instance, CCAG did research on corporate money going to leadership PACs and found that the specter of the numbers being released was enough to encourage them to do the right thing.



Alliance for a Just Society
convenes community and racial
justice organizations nationwide
on critical public policy issues,
providing research and policy
analysis and fostering public
conversation.

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