From the Executive Director

Our new president is placing government transparency front and center.

President Obama’s first executive orders promoted the release of government records and instituted ground-breaking ethics rules. He has promised to make government documents and data available on the web on an unprecedented scale. He has even quoted former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, saying “sunlight is the best disinfectant.”

This January, President Obama’s transition team approached me for advice on how to reach its transparency goals. I take that to be a strong endorsement of MAPLight.org’s pioneering work illuminating the role of special-interest money in politics. I am thrilled that our innovative organization is part of the burgeoning movement to open up government for everyone, which itself is part of the broader Internet-driven trend towards greater transparency in all parts of society.

In 2008, we established MAPLight.org as an important new resource for uncovering connections between money and politics. We reached millions of voters as CNN, the public radio show “Marketplace,” and hundreds of newspapers, TV stations and radio shows across the country cited our research. Last year we appeared in 252 print and online news stories, 78 radio and TV stories, and 1,088 blog posts.

We analyzed our 2008 news coverage and found that 70% of our coverage came from just seven topics; most of them “hot” breaking news stories. To maximize our effectiveness going forward, we are focusing our research resources to generate more in-depth data more quickly for this type of story.

cont. on page 3
Donor Profile:
Craig Johnson is CEO and a co-founder of Legal Services Law Partners LLP (LVP), a virtual law firm. Prior to co-founding LVP, Craig was chairman and co-founder of MAPLight.org, a nonpartisan group that has set up an electronic database of how lawmakers vote. On December 3, 2008, MAPLight.org and the California First Amendment Coalition (CFAC) filed a lawsuit against the California Office of the Legislature to gain an effort to access the state’s electronic database of how lawmakers vote. Why is this lawsuit necessary? The state currently publishes legislative voting records on a state-operated website, but in a text format that is suitable only for viewing, and not for downloading. We at MAPLight.org want the public to have a copy of the underlying database so that we may match the legislators’ votes to campaign contributions of major donors. The California First Amendment Coalition (CFAC) and we are after,” on how our lawmakers vote.

State so far has denied MAPLight.org’s request to keep its database of basic democratic information hidden from the public. It will be a brighter day for all of us when government sees itself as working for the public who pays the bills. Why has the Legislative Office of California been reluctant to embrace technology as mandated by law? The Legislature is obviously afraid that release of the legislative database to MAPLight.org will make it too easy for voters to connect financial contributions by special interests to specific votes and other accompanying actions by legislators,” said Peter Scheer, executive director of MAPLight.org.

Flash!

FUNDRAISING CORNER: MEDIA SPONSOR
With just five people on staff, MAPLight.org is a small organization that does a lot with a little. Some things, though, require big dollars. As much as we would like to be able to dedicate all of our resources to driving our media campaign coverage, we need your support.

The data is there to answer those questions, and it’s supposed to be public. But so far, the Legislature’s online records are not comprehensive, as mandated by law. In a format that enables citizens to easily track voting trends over time or make correlations between votes and campaign contributions. A glance at MAPLight’s Web site makes it clear why California legislators might want to block access to the data the organization seeks. Using an electronic database, MAPLight has collected and correlated campaign contribution and voting records in a way that allows the public to see with a click of the mouse which interest groups are the biggest campaign contributors to individual lawmakers and how lawmakers vote on issues that those contributors care about.

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If you want to know how your legislator voted on one particular bill, it’s easy enough to find out. But when you want to know how your legislator voted on a state bill related to air pollution or to auto insurance – well, good luck. Obtaining that kind of information takes days or weeks of time. and other money to spend that we keep the public’s trust in our political system. This lawsuit needs to be settled. Fast. Its mere existence is a blight on the California Legislature.

There is no mystery about why California politicians might be reluctant to cooperate with MAPLight. The nonprofit, nonpartisan group has given public officials an easy-to-navigate way to track the connection between the money that the public gives and the decisions lawmakers make. But a lawsuit filed last week underscores the degree to which California’s legislative corruption has been by all reports, the biggest campaign contributors to MAPLight.org.

How do we know? One of my pet peeves is the tendency of legislators to fail to vote – a practice San Francisco Chronicle

If you represent a conservative district and you want to make it easier for the public to find information about why their lawmakers vote the way they do, you will support MAPLight.org. If you represent a district where the voters are worried about their representatives not being honest, you will support MAPLight.org. If you are an anti-tax advocate, you will support MAPLight.org.

If you represent a district where the voters are worried about their representatives not being honest, you will support MAPLight.org. If you are an anti-tax advocate, you will support MAPLight.org. I believe that small, focused efforts by people who have a lot to gain can make a critical difference. Large special interest groups can often make the biggest difference.

California politicians have been playing political games for months while the state budget has languished, but now they are being forced to confront the true issues and compromise. I’m interested in doing work that makes our elected representatives more responsive to the voters and eliminate the bias and corruption that we can find a systemic solution to these problems, but in the meantime the best we can do is to try to disclose unambiguously both and legislators accountable just as easily as the light on a dangerous street corner at night provides a deterrent.

I believe in disclosure as a prophylactic and in making our laws stronger for the benefit of the public. A politician’s honesty, MAPLight.org’s correlations (though they do not show causality) show some very suspicious patterns. I hope at some point that we can find a systemic solution to these problems, but in the meantime the best we can do is to do everything we can to hold legislators accountable just as easily as the light on a dangerous street corner at night provides a deterrent.

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MAPLight.org is one such way. I am interested in the way political issues interest you? Besides campaign finance reform, what other political issues interest you? As someone serious about your experiences with MAPLight.org? What do MAPLight.org is doing. It’s extremely important when politicians have so much capital and money to spend that we keep the public’s trust in our political system.

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**MAPLIGHT.ORG IN THE NEWS**

MAPLight.org Files Public Records Lawsuit Against State of California

On December 3, 2008, MAPLight.org and the California First Amendment Coalition (CFAC) filed a lawsuit against the California Office of Legislative Counsel in an effort to gain access to the state’s electronic database of how lawmakers vote.

**Why is this lawsuit necessary?**

The lawsuit is necessary because the California Public Records Act requires state agencies to give the public access to government records. The executive director of MAPLight.org, Daniel Newman, said, “The Legislature is obviously afraid that the public will see the links between special-interest contributions and voting patterns, but the law is clear that the public has a right to this information.”

**What is MAPLight.org?**

MAPLight.org is a nonpartisan group that has set up an easy-to-navigate way for voters to connect financial contributions with special interests to specific votes and other communicating actions by legislators.

**What is the lawsuit about?**

The lawsuit is about the release of legislative voting patterns to the public. The lawsuit was filed in an effort to gain access to the state’s electronic database of how lawmakers vote.

**What is the California Public Records Act?**

The California Public Records Act is a law that requires state agencies to give the public access to government records. The act is enforced by the California Office of Legislative Counsel.

**What is the California First Amendment Coalition (CFAC)?**

The CFAC is a nonprofit organization that advocates for freedom of the press and transparency in government. They filed the lawsuit against the California Office of Legislative Counsel.

**What is the California Office of Legislative Counsel?**

The California Office of Legislative Counsel is a state agency responsible for keeping track of legislative voting patterns and making them available to the public.

**Why is it necessary for the public to have access to legislative voting patterns?**

Access to legislative voting patterns is necessary because it allows the public to see the connections between campaign contributions and legislative actions. This transparency is important because it helps ensure that lawmakers are making decisions based on what is best for the state, rather than what is best for the special interests that donate money to their campaigns.

**What can be done to increase transparency in government?**

Increasing transparency in government can be accomplished through laws that require state agencies to give the public access to government records, as well as through organizations that advocate for transparency and work to make government more open to the public.

**Who is involved in this lawsuit?**

MAPLight.org and the California First Amendment Coalition (CFAC) are involved in this lawsuit. They are fighting for access to the state’s electronic database of how lawmakers vote.

**What is the outcome of this lawsuit?**

As of the writing of this page, the outcome of the lawsuit is not yet known. However, the lawsuit is an important step in increasing transparency in government and ensuring that the public has access to important information about how lawmakers vote.

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**Flash! A NEWSLETTER FROM MAPLight.org**

**DONOR PROFILE: AN INTERVIEW WITH CRAIG JOHNSON**

Craig Johnson is CEO and a co-founder of Virtual Law Partners LLP (VLP), a virtual law firm. Prior to co-founding VLP, Craig was chairman and co-founder of V asking Media Group, a law firm specializing in internet and technology companies.

**What is MAPLight.org?**

I came across MAPLight.org when working with a tech client on the issue of transparency in government. In California, politicians have been playing political games for months while the state budget is languishing, but now they are being forced to confront the true issues and come to a big decision. I thought this would be a great opportunity for MAPLight.org to shine.

**What is the impact of MAPLight.org’s work?**

I believe that digital platforms make it easier for people to find and support the issues they care about. MAPLight.org is doing a great job of making government more transparent and accountable, which is crucial in a time when so many people are focused on their personal finances.

**What can you do to support MAPLight.org?**

You can support MAPLight.org by becoming a Media Sponsor or by donating directly. Every contribution helps MAPLight.org continue to shine a light on government transparency and make it easier for people to hold their leaders accountable.

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**Flash! A NEWSLETTER FROM MAPLight.org**

**THE TRANSPARENCY TREND**

In the year ahead, we will continue to update our Congress site daily, launch MAPLight.org for Los Angeles County, and revamp our California site so that it’s current and updated. Daily. MAPLight.org is also working with several organizations impacted by the Bernard Madoff scandal. The JEHT Foundation, one of MAPLight.org’s partners, had lost some of Madoff’s malfeasance, had granted us funding for an even more robust expansion in 2009. In 2009, we will reach out and continue to connect the problems we face as a country with the transparency tools that run through our legislative system.
A RIVER OF MONEY FLOWING TO HOUSE REPS VOTING YES ON AUTO BAILOUT

In early December, the U.S. House of Representatives passed the Auto Industry Financing and Restructuring Act, which authorizes the federal government to loan up to $14 billion to the country’s three ailing automakers. MAPLight.org’s research department revealed that over five years (January 2003 - October 2008), auto manufacturers, auto dealers and labor unions together contributed an average of $74,100 to the campaign of each representative who voted for the auto bailout, compared with an average contribution of $45,015 to each representative who voted against the bailout. In other words, legislators who voted Yes were given, on average, 65% more money than those who opposed the rescue.

Numerous blogs and media outlets cited MAPLight.org’s money and vote data in their stories about the bill’s passage.

For the Senate vote on the bailout, MAPLight.org pulled together custom research at the request of CNN. Below is an excerpt of reporter David Mattingly’s primetime story:

“CNN’s David Mattingly looks [at] why some Southern senators voted against the auto bailout. It’s kind of like a war between the North and the South. Senators in the South are saying no to bailout loans to carmakers up north in Detroit. Eight Senate votes from just these four Southern states could have saved the bailout. Instead, all their senators voted no…”

“A good way to illustrate how the battle lines are drawn is to follow the money. One nonpartisan calculation by MAPLight.org shows the UAW contrib-
uted an average of $7,400 to each yes vote it got in the Senate. Compare that to the $147 it spent for each no vote. And that’s over a period of seven years. This fight started a long time before the Big Three bailout hit the Senate floor.”

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The story also aired on CNN’s “Campbell Brown.” As a result of these two CNN broadcasts, MAPLight.org experienced first-hand the impact that CNN has on shaping national and international news coverage. Over the next few days, the story also appeared on 21 local television news shows across the country.

Auto bailout: North vs. South

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