New Website Shines Light of Transparency as Never Before

MAPLight.org’s new website was launched during Sunshine Week (March 15-19), a national initiative to open a dialogue about open government and freedom of information. MAPLight.org users will find on the new site robust tools to:

- illuminate how money aligns with votes
- reveal data on individual legislators and how much money they have received from industries and organizations
- expose specific contributions to persons, by party, by committee, and within date

ranges and important and vital features including:

- a new U.S. Congress research blog
- a powerful search engine

You can see a list of what’s new on our website, examples of MAPLight.org’s findings about money and votes on our ‘Spotlight After a year in development, MAPLight.org’s new website was launched during Sunshine Week (March 15-19), a national initiative to open a dialogue about open government and freedom of information. MAPLight.org users will find on the new site robust tools to:

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From the Executive Director:

THE RIVER OF MONEY

A river of money underlies all decisions in Congress and in Sacramento. The U.S. Supreme Court decision in Citizens United v. FEC will flood this river, unleashing unlimited corporate spending on ads to influence elections. We will still be electing the best fundraisers, rather than the best leaders. MAPLight.org’s research has repeatedly shown that politicians’ relentless fundraising has a payoff to interest groups that provide the funds.

We find that on issue after issue, how lawmakers vote aligns with the interest groups that fund their campaigns. For example:

- **Prescription drug imports:** In the health care debate in the U.S. Senate, senators voting to block drug imports from other countries, as drug companies wanted, received an average of $85,779 each from drug companies. That’s 69 percent more than given to senators who voted to allow imports.

- **Financial bailout:** House members who voted for the $700 billion bank bailout received 54 percent more campaign contributions from banks and securities firms than House members voting against the bailout. That is an average of $231,877 in bank contributions received by each House member voting “Yes,” $150,982 for each member voting “No.”

- **Telecom immunity:** House Democrats who flipped their positions to favor immunity for telecom firms received an average of 68 percent more money from AT&T’s, Verizon’s and Sprint’s political action committees, compared with Democrats who remained opposed to immunity. That’s $4,987 to each Democrat who opposed immunity and $8,359 to each Democrat who flipped positions to favor telecom firms.

Despite the court’s ruling, there is hope. Seven states allow candidates to run for office and win without accepting funds from private interests seeking favors. In Connecticut, for example, after just one election with their new citizen-funded election system, 81 percent of sitting Connecticut legislators were free of seeking big donations from
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MAPLight.org’s Work Highlighted In Open Government from O’Reilly Media

At a time when President Barack Obama has declared that he is committed to creating “an unprecedented level of openness” in government and political candidates at all levels rush to place themselves on the side of “transparency,” what is open government? What are the tools and new perspectives needed to bring it about?

Open Government: Collaboration, Transparency and Participation in Practice, edited by Daniel Lathrop and Laurel Ruma (O’Reilly Media, 2010) addresses more than 30 critical issues related to bringing government into the Web 2.0 world and giving government back to the public.


In 2009, MAPLight.org made news nationwide when it took California state government to court and won access to state government data, part of the movement across the country to fight for and win public access to data and records.

The chapter written by Daniel Newman can be read at: bit.ly/maplight-opengovt

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interest groups investing in politics. They are free to make decisions based on citizens’ best interests. Imagine the California Legislature, and U.S. Congress, elected without influence-seeking dollars. It may be hard to imagine, but it is reality now in these forward-thinking states. It could be a reality in California and Washington, D.C., very soon.

In Congress, the Fair Elections Now Act (fairelectionsnow.org) has more than 125 sponsors in Congress, including Sen. Barbara Boxer.

And in California, the California Fair Elections Act (Prop.15) will be on this June’s ballot (yesfairelections.org). Endorsed by the League of Women Voters of California, this measure will take key steps forward to let state officials focus on governing instead of fundraising.

The Supreme Court decision takes a system that’s already bad and makes it worse. Fortunately, solutions are already tested and ready to be enacted — by Congress and by California voters this June.

This piece was first published as an oped on January 23, 2010 in the Sacramento Bee.

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on Congress’ blog, and use of our data in the news.

A four-minute video tour of the new site answers questions and presents important features.

MAPLight.org combines data from the Center for Responsive Politics, GovTrack.us, National Institute on Money in State Politics, Los Angeles City Ethics Commission and other sources to better inform Americans and local and national media about the role of special-interest money in our political system.

“Users will find significantly faster, easier access to the kinds of critical information and data they need to shine a light on money and votes in U.S. elections,” said Daniel Newman, MAPLight.org executive director.

New Wisconsin Site Under Development

A new website to track money and votes in Wisconsin is under development at MAPLight.org thanks to a grant from the Open Society Institute. The grant is part of the Institute’s efforts to promote transparency programs.

While the project will formally launch in June, 2011, a discussion group for interested parties has been started. Information about the project is at bit.ly/maplight-wisconsin
PROFILE WITH DOUG EDWARDS

What makes MAPLight.org stand out in this time of so many needs and urgent issues?

The day after the last election, I started receiving phone calls from politicians seeking contributions for their re-election campaigns. I wasn’t surprised, but I was disappointed. Until the corrosive effects of this system are exposed and quantified, it will never change. You can’t fix a problem you don’t know exists. MAPLight.org provides a powerful tool for those of us who want to see a government that acts according to the needs of the American public, rather than the prodding of those who write large checks.

So, while I continue to support traditional social service organizations, I’ve also added MAPLight.org to my investment portfolio. I think it has unique potential to generate an extremely high ROI.

How did you become involved with MAPLight.org?

After becoming disenchanted with traditional methods of political involvement, I sought out Larry Lessig at Stanford University, to discuss what other avenues might be available for engaging the system. We had a wide-ranging discussion, and when I mentioned an online site I was developing to use Congressional voting data to rank politicians, he suggested I look into MAPLight.org. I did, and quickly realized their approach was more practical and useful than my own.

Why do you stay involved with MAPLight.org?

I’ve been very pleased with the progress the organization has made with limited resources. They have the same kind of laser focus and mission-driven mentality I saw at Google in its early days. I’ve introduced a number of engineers I know to MAPLight.org and they’ve been impressed with the organization’s creative use of data and the potential for it to become even more useful. As a result many of them have become supporters as well.

Besides campaign finance reform, what other political issues interest you?

Transparency, ethics and finance reform are by far the most important to me, because they’re so fundamental to everything else. Far better to move the rudder on the Titanic than to rearrange the deck chairs.

If there was one thing — or two — you would change in our political system, what would they be?

While there’s plenty of name-calling and finger-pointing, there’s too little actual accountability in government. I’d like to see the power of public information and social networks combine to make it harder to hide the earmarks, the special exceptions and the hypocrisy of politicians who claim to be for clean government, but still manage to accommodate their own supporters at the expense of the common good.

Doug Edwards was Google’s first marketing director and is writing a book about the company’s early days.

STAFF ROUNDUP

Eric Braswell has joined MAPLight.org as its technical director. Eric has more than 15 years experience in website development and management for both corporations and academic institutions, focusing on open source platforms. He is responsible for MAPLight.org’s web operations, including new features and maintenance of the site. He has a BA degree in Chinese language and literature from the University of Oregon.

Jeffrey D. Friedman also has come aboard as research director. Jeffrey was an assistant editor for editorial product development and a deputy editor at Congressional Quarterly and CQ.com. He brings to MAPLight.org his experience as a writer and editor, researcher, project manager, and technical product developer. He earned a BA degree in journalism from California State University-Chico.

Emily Calhoun, MAPLight.org’s previous research director, is now a contractor for MAPLight.org and is developing research-based editorial content.

Kent Richards has joined MAPLight.org as a web developer. Kent has five years experience developing dynamic web applications and 13 years experience working with nonprofits. Kent has a BA degree in computer science from the University of Texas at Austin.

Daniel Newman was named a Gov 2.0 Hero by the website GovFresh in January. Dan discusses MAPLight.org, areas of government ripe for the use of Web 2.0 tools, and the development of Gov 2.0 at bit.ly/govfresh-newman. He joins a host of well-known “citizens and public servants actively engaging social media to build a more transparent, open and collaborative democracy,” including Ellen Miller of the Sunlight Foundation and Craig Newmark of Craigslist.
Senators Voting to Block Drug Imports Received 76 Percent More from Drug Companies

When the U.S. Senate voted against the importation of prescription drugs at the end of 2009, MAPLight.org research showed that senators who voted to block imports, siding with drug companies, received an average of $73,678 each from drug companies over the past six years—76 percent more than senators who voted in favor of imports.

Among Democratic senators, those voting to block imports received an average of $85,779 each from drug companies, 69 percent more than those who voted in favor of imports. MAPLight.org also found that California state senators who voted against a single-payer proposal, siding with health insurers, received an average of $43,633 each from health insurers and HMOs in the 2006 and 2008 election cycles, twice the $22,185 received by those voting for the bill.

Daniel Newman discusses the new MAPLight.org website on the Dylan Ratigan Show on MSNBC on March 18. Ratigan said of the site, “This is the most extraordinary use of technology I believe I have seen when it comes to politics.” He also noted “[the site] will be incredibly useful come the election in November. I couldn’t recommend more strongly that every person who will vote in this country look up their local representation and see what their record is.” Watch the interview at bit.ly/ratigan-dan-newman

MAPLight.org is a premier example of the growing Web 2.0 movement to improve government transparency. New to our organization? Want to discover more about what we do? Learn about our new website and more. Join us for a special conference call and webinar on Wednesday, June 9, 1 p.m. Pacific (4 p.m. Eastern). To sign up visit bit.ly/maplight-briefing

You’re Invited!

WEBINAR: Intro to MAPLight.org
June 9, 2010