MAPLight.org has joined forces with Wired.com to launch a new widget called “Influence Tracker.” Featuring the silhouettes of lawmakers emblazoned with NASCAR-style logos of their top donors, the widget, launched just before the election, equipped voters with a mental image of who is underwriting their legislators.

Influence Tracker displays the total number of dollars that each lawmaker has raised over the past two years, along with each one’s relative “ranking” as a fundraiser. The widget can be embedded on any website or blog, so if you haven’t already, use it to show the world who your legislator’s biggest sponsors are.

Wired.com and MAPLight.org also worked together on an investigation of several key defense contractors who have been making hefty donations in an effort to win the contract for the president’s helicopter, Marine One. “Follow the Money: Pork Powered Pig Preps for Flight” is the first in a series of collaborations between Wired.com and MAPLight.org.

From the Director:
Patterns of Influence

The flood of money in November’s midterm elections swept away previous spending records, pushing lawmakers of both parties further toward control by political donors rather than ordinary voters.

In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision, some of that money is now completely hidden from public view, spent by shadowy groups that don’t have to reveal where their funds come from. Does this secrecy take away from the work that we do at MAPLight.org?

Not at all. First, to fulfill our mission, it doesn’t matter if we aren’t able to track every last penny that’s spent. Our goal at MAPLight.org has always been to illuminate the patterns of money’s influence. We show people how campaign contributions connect to global warming, credit card rates, health care, and the many other key issues that affect people’s lives.

What’s more, only a small fraction of funds spent were spent in secret. The Center for Responsive Politics reports that the cost of federal races in this election totaled over $4 billion. Only 3 to 5 percent of that money was spent by outside shadow groups, according to a Sunlight Foundation report. That means most money can be tracked.

Government works best when it is open and transparent, and when citizens are informed and engaged in the work of overseeing democracy. MAPLight.org provides the platform that makes it possible for citizens to access and analyze countless connections between the money, the interest groups, and the votes. Our work...

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The Best Government Money Can Buy

In Congress...
The DISCLOSE Act sought to increase the transparency of corporate and special-interest money in national political campaigns, requiring organizations to reveal their identities when funding political ads. The bill additionally sought to ban certain entities—such as foreign corporations, government contractors, and TARP fund recipients—from making political expenditures. (Source: OpenCongress)
The bill passed the House of Representatives in June, but failed on two separate occasions to reach final consideration in the Senate. Interest groups opposing this bill gave more than 7 times as much in campaign contributions to senators as interest groups supporting this bill.

The Money Behind California’s Ballot Initiatives
In California and beyond, MAPLight.org was the go-to source for the most up-to-date contribution data on the state’s 2010 ballot initiatives. We created Web pages and email alerts profiling state propositions, showing the total amount of money given by supporters and opponents, the top 10 contributors, and interesting breakdowns of the data.

For example, for Proposition 23, which would have suspended laws to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, MAPLight.org found that:
• $11 million was given to support, and $31 million was given to oppose.
• 71% of money in support came from out of state (49% of it from Texas).
• 70% of money in opposition came from within California.

Leading up to the election, we updated each proposition page with the latest numbers. Each page also featured an option for interested citizens and journalists to receive updates and to subscribe to an RSS feed about the proposition it profiled.
Why is the work that MAPLight.org does important?

MAPLight helps citizens, journalists, and public interest organizations connect the dots between money and political action.

What was your first impression of MAPLight.org as an organization?

At the conference where I first learned of MAPLight, Dan did a presentation. It was really cool to see what technology would allow him to do — how he could mash data and show how particular industries had had such an impact on votes.

How has your impression of MAPLight.org evolved over time?

I’ve seen the utility of the tools MAPLight offers, especially now that it focuses on Congress as well. CREW works more in federal politics than in state politics, and our researchers use MAPLight’s tools to help make the case — to demonstrate — that there is a relationship between campaign donations and the legislation that passes through Congress.

In this time of so many needs and urgent issues, what makes MAPLight.org stand out?

As people are becoming more and more disenchanted with politics, and the Supreme Court came out with the horrible Citizens United decision, in order to push for effective, real change in the way things are done — the way politics are run — Americans are going to need to see the evidence of the links between money and politics. Merely telling people there’s a link is not going to move the ball, but demonstrating time after time that members of Congress and members of state legislatures are making decisions that are not in Americans’ interest, but are simply in their own financial interest, will eventually lead to systemic change.

And those changes are so important because then money can be spent on the real priorities, things like education and infrastructure, and not on lawmakers’ pet projects, or the pet projects of those who donate the most to lawmakers.

How did you become interested in money and politics?

I became interested as I was watching Tom DeLay years ago. It was so clear that he had taken the concept of pay-to-play to new levels, and he was really selling Americans down the river for power and money. No one really seemed to be doing anything about it, and that was why I started CREW, so we could take on that issue. And the more I’ve worked on ethics issues, the more I’ve realized that all the ethics reforms that we discuss are really tinkering around the edges. Until you deal with the central issue of money and politics, you’re not going to clean the system up in any real way.

In your opinion, what is the most exciting thing that’s happening in the realm of money and politics?

I think more and more people are starting to realize the problem. I think Citizens United, as horrible a decision as it was, may become a galvanizing moment. There are so many Americans who are aware of the decision and don’t like it that it presents a real opportunity for those of us working in the field to press our case and demonstrate that there is a real need for reform.

What’s the biggest challenge at this point in time?

The lethargy of lawmakers who are invested in the status quo and won’t want to see change.

What do you think has to happen in order to realize some kind of substantive change surrounding the problem of money and politics?

I think lawmakers will have to be forced. I think Americans will have to rise up and push for it. I think it will have to become a priority of all Americans — you know, just like they say they want the economy fixed, they have to all say they want the campaign finance system fixed.

So what do you think can be done to facilitate that process of getting citizens to prioritize this issue?

I think people need to be taught about the relationships between money and politics. And if they can see that issues they care about are being handled badly or improperly handled or ignored because of the amount of money in politics — if they can see that, for example, some of the big corporations are paying for legislators to take a certain position that is in contrast to Americans’ interest; for example, they see enough oil companies are paying for lawmakers to ignore the problems of climate change while they see more and more devastation wrought by climate change — Americans will be angry, and will push out lawmakers who don’t stand for reform on these issues.

Are there any particular issues that you see as being closely related to money and politics as a general issue?

I think climate change is a key one. Oil companies are spending a huge amount of money, and you’re going to see in this Congress less action on the problems of climate change, for example, as Republicans who got oil money are less interested in pushing for legislation that would have a negative impact on the bottom line of those oil companies.

If there was one specific thing that you would change in our political system, what might it be?

I would have public financing of campaigns.

What would you want other people to know about MAPLight.org and your experience with the organization?

That it can easily allow you to find links between money and politics that you might not have thought to look for yourself.

Why should other people get more involved with MAPLight.org?

Because politics, in fact, permeates every part of your life even when you’re not thinking about it. Politicians are making decisions that impact your life, and if they’re making decisions because of the campaign contributions they’ve received and not because of what’s really in the interest of the American people, we are all left wanting and we’re all harmed by that.

Melanie Sloan, a MAPLight.org board member, founded Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW) in 2003 and serves as its Executive Director.
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MAPLight.org Reaches Millions with Illuminating Data

As the most expensive midterm election in history ran its course, MAPLight.org was there shining a light on the flow of money. Our research received hundreds of citations, reaching three million people in just three weeks.

Media outlets that covered MAPLight.org’s research included: the New York Times, USA Today, Reuters, the Wall Street Journal, CNBC, CBS News, Forbes.com, Grist, the UK Guardian, the Huffington Post, ABC News radio New York, KGO radio, KGO TV, KPCC, KPFA, KQED, Public News Service, the Los Angeles Times, Marketplace, MarketWatch, the Mercury News, Mother Jones, National Journal, NBC Bay Area, PBS.org, the Sacramento Bee, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Washington Examiner, and many others.