MAPLIGHT REACHES 55 MILLION!

MapLight reached an audience of 55 million people in 2011—three times more than in 2009.

From the President

The Myths of Political Money and the Reality of Corruption: Citizens United, Two Years Later

Published in the San Jose Mercury News, January 2012

With its disastrous Citizens United decision two years ago, the Supreme Court unleashed corporations to spend unlimited amounts of money to influence elections. By the Court’s invented criteria, this unlimited spending does not corrupt American democracy so long as it’s “independent” of candidates’ own campaigns. The Court also promoted transparency—disclosure of who funds our politicians—as a key ingredient in our democracy. Two years later, this independence and transparency are, in practice, merely myths.

The Myth of Independence. Since the Citizens United court decision, SuperPACs have become an expanding legal channel for corporations and individuals to promote candidates with unlimited funds. We hear candidates on the campaign trail state repeatedly that SuperPACs are independent from candidate campaigns. But in practice SuperPAC independence is a myth. SuperPACs are typically run by close associates of the candidate. And although SuperPACs cannot privately discuss with a candidate’s campaign the size and location of their ad buys, they don’t need to—they can simply publish this information publicly on their website, or in a news article. SuperPACs and candidate campaign funds are all part of the same machine working to promote the candidate—a distinction with little difference.

The Myth of Transparency. It is a myth that there is meaningful disclosure of who is paying for candidates to get elected. Corporations and individuals can now spend unlimited money to promote favored politicians, anonymously. They do this through various legal paperwork methods, including passing funds through nonprofit groups. Even for contributions that aren’t made anonymously, voters still can’t determine who is funding a candidate until after election day, for many large campaign contributions. For example, SuperPACs created after January 1, 2012 do not have to disclose their donors until February at the earliest. This 6-week disclosure black hole includes the Republican primary elections in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina, and Florida. The Republican presidential nomination race might be completed before we know who funded the candidates.

For the U.S. Senate, contributions to Senate campaigns in the weeks prior to election day aren’t posted publicly until after voters cast their ballots. This delay comes from an indefensible legal exception that lets Senate candidates file disclosure reports on paper, while House and Presidential candidates must file electronically.

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Money’s influence on an open Internet

As thousands of websites went dark in protest of the Stop Online Piracy Act (SOPA) and its Senatorial counterpart, the Protect IP Act (PIPA), MapLight’s research kept the spotlight shining on the moneyed interests lurking behind these controversial bills. Proponents of SOPA and PIPA—entertainment and publishing groups—claim the bills would be a much-needed step toward protection of copyrighted material on the Internet. Internet companies and other opponents claim they amount to Internet censorship and would threaten the United States’ place as a global innovator. MapLight’s research revealed, for example:

- House members who sponsored SOPA received almost 4 times as much in campaign contributions from the movie, music, and TV entertainment industries ($1,983,596) as they received from the software and Internet industries ($524,977).

Over just a few weeks, our data was cited hundreds of times, reaching nearly 3 million people via the

New York Times, Forbes, Mother Jones, Reuters, Fortune (CNN Money), TechCrunch, the National Journal, and other outlets.
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U.S. Congress contributions data provided by the Center for Responsive Politics (OpenSecrets.org) 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).

MapLight data fuels report on “legalized bribery” in House committees

Citing MapLight data, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington released a report analyzing money’s role in industry regulation. The report reveals that “industries and interest groups are engaging in what amounts to legalized bribery by funneling enormous amounts of money to the very lawmakers who are supposed to be holding their feet to the fire,” according to CREW Executive Director and MapLight Board Co-Chair Melanie Sloan. Among the findings:

• As members of House committees rise in power and seniority, they receive more donations from industries they are charged with regulating.
• Since 2007, many committee leaders have regularly voted in alignment with industries they monitor—in some cases disproportionately in favor of industry positions compared to the average member of their party.

The report, entitled “Funds for Favors: Exposing Donors’ Influence on Committee Leaders,” can be found at http://www.citizensforethics.org/pages/funds-for-favors.

New Staff Roundup

Tierra Allen, Development Assistant, aids in fundraising and administration. She graduated magna cum laude from Amherst College with a B.A. in Theater & Dance and concentrations in English and Black Studies.

Zach Bogoshian, Communications Intern, works on media outreach, research, and social media. Zach graduated with a B.A. in Political Science, International Relations from UCLA.

Chris Gorin, Political Reporting Intern, writes for our Spotlight on Congress blog. He holds a B.A. in Politics from UC Santa Cruz and an M.A. in International Relations from San Francisco State.

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The Myths of Political Money and the Reality of Corruption

Candidates benefit from the Myth of Independence. They avoid getting their hands dirty by being associated with sharp negative advertising against their opponents—even though these negative ads are placed by the candidate’s close associates and funded by the candidate’s main financial backers.

Candidates also benefit from the Myth of Transparency. They avoid the public accountability of whether they are working for their voters, or their donors.

President Obama can make progress on his transparency promises now, simply by appointing commissioners to the moribund Federal Elections Commission. The FEC has the power to pass stronger transparency and independence rules, and five of the six FEC commissions are serving despite expired terms. Yet President Obama has sat on the sidelines, refusing to nominate new commissioners.

Senators can act now as well, to end their absurd electronic filing exemption at any time, fixing this illusion of transparency. The U.S. Congress can pass a law for rapid and comprehensive transparency of political money, like the DISCLOSE Act, which was defeated two years ago.

The five Supreme Court justices who decided the Citizens United case wrote that corporations’ unlimited political spending was allowed so long as it was independent of candidates’ campaigns, not coordinated with a candidate. But in practice independence is a myth.

The Court also wrote of the critical importance of disclosure of who funds our politicians: “Prompt disclosure of expenditures can provide shareholders and citizens with information needed to hold corporations and elected officials accountable for their positions and supporters...Citizens can see whether elected officials are ‘“in the pocket” of so-called moneyed interests.’”

Now, two years later, we have neither meaningful independence nor disclosure. Our government is now corrupt, both in fact and in law.
PROFILE
JOSEPH HOLMES

With so many different organizations working for change, what makes MapLight stand out?

It’s meeting an unmet demand to provide critical evidence of what I regard as the worst problem that we’ve got, which is that we don’t own our own Congress. We’re never going to get anywhere solving all the other problems we may be more concerned about, whether it’s the environment, war and peace, education, economic justice, or the strength of the economy, unless we solve the problem of making the Congress work for us first.

If you could change our political system in one way, what would it be?

Public financing of elections. There are lots of ways to do it, too. For example, if what you do is use the taxpayer dollars to match funds that are raised the dirty way, then the public’s money is being used to amplify the corruption, not to replace it, so what you need is money that makes a race clean. In other words, someone who runs is free to represent the people they’re supposed to represent, not the people who paid for their election.

I like to refer to all the remedies that have been traditionally considered as “Waiting for Godot.” You want Congress to help people change the system which controls Congress, when so many of the people that are in Congress now are only there because of the system being corrupt, or are habituated to the situation where the money works for them. So we’re not going to get the Congress to do much in the way of what the public needs. And it occurs to me that we don’t need them to. Because the amount of money required to do that is so tiny that we don’t need to get it from the pot of federal tax dollars; we can just cough it up ourselves.

I call it “your country for a burrito,” because it costs less than $6.60 per person per year to pay for the cost of all federal elections. The 2010 elections cost a total of $4 billion, and that’s once every two years, so at that rate it’s $2 billion a year divided by 300 million Americans. It’s nothing compared to what the American people spend on a wide range of ordinary daily expenses. We spend $300 billion every year buying electricity, $800 billion a year buying petroleum, and yet we won’t spend $2 billion to buy the future?

I would like to think it’s possible to make an organization that could solicit donations from the American people and use those donations to create a pot of money that could be given to anybody running for office who wants to forswear dirty money, and that means no corporate PACs, no individual contributions above some low amount. There’d be a heck of a big discussion about how it should work, but I don’t see why it wouldn’t work.

What would it take for citizens to compete with moneyed interests who are trying to buy Congress?

You just need to explain that this is a trivial expense. We could have one in ten people giving $50 and that would be enough to buy 80-something percent of all congressional races. We don’t have to outlaw corporate contributions; we can dilute them and wash them away with our own financial power if we simply exercise it. As it is now, we’re behaving like a giant flock of headless chickens, and the powerful moneyed interests are highly organized. It’s the worst case of being penny-wise and pound-foolish in the world that we don’t buy the Congress.

Between 1 in 300 and 1 in 500 Americans donates money to politics in a given congressional election cycle. No one’s participating. It’s completely self-defeating. Buying the Congress would be unbelievably cheap, and the financial rewards alone are on the order of $1,000-$2,000 back for every dollar that the people spend doing this. And that doesn’t count all the other advantages. We’ve been fleeced terribly because we don’t own the Congress. And it’s really not left wing versus right wing. It’s really more like powerful, moneyed interests versus everyone else.

Why is MapLight’s work important?

It’s like putting a stake in the ground and saying, “Here it is. Here’s proof that it’s true that money’s buying our public policy out from under our noses.”

Why should other people support MapLight?

Because pound for pound it’s a very good use of your money. MapLight has been doing a really good job at getting a lot of good engineering work done and getting data out there, filling an important gap in the picture. You have to be able to make a good case.

Joseph Holmes, MapLight supporter, has been photographing wild landscapes for over 40 years and has generously donated seven large prints to the MapLight office. An online gallery of his work can be found at www.josephholmes.com.
MapLight unveils new “Topic” and “Company” pages

MapLight is excited to announce the launch of our Topic and Company pages, which provide new portals into our data and research. Our Topic pages allow users to view in one place all of MapLight’s findings—as well as all of the bills, interest groups, and lawmakers in our database—related to a given topic, such as “environment” or “health care.” This new, issue-oriented presentation assembles and highlights the specific, tangible consequences of campaign money for popular issues.

Our Company pages profile top-contributing companies and organizations, ranking them according to total donations they’ve made, bill positions they’ve taken, and bills on which they’ve gotten their way. They also show which legislators have received the most contributions from an organization.

As always, we’re deeply appreciative of our data partners, who help make this work possible: the Center for Responsive Politics, GovTrack, the National Institute on Money in State Politics, and the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign.

Lessig proposes corruption solution in new book

MapLight Board Member and longtime supporter Lawrence Lessig had a busy few months, releasing a new book, “Republic, Lost: How Money Corrupts Congress—and a Plan to Stop It,” and drawing attention to how money corrupts politics through an appearance on “The Daily Show” and articles in Rolling Stone and the New York Times, among others. Prof. Lessig’s book makes a case for why we must strike at the root of our country’s problems—its broken system of campaign finance—before progress on any of the other urgent issues we face will be possible, and it proposes several specific ways the American public might accomplish this.