MapLight is excited to launch the first of our online Voter Guides, designed to radically reduce voters’ difficulty in gaining clear and complete information on ballot measures. Complete with summaries, impact analyses, funding information, news articles, and more, plus daily updates reflecting breaking developments, these online guides provide a one-stop information resource that empowers voters to navigate competing campaign messages and cast votes that reflect their best interests.

With support from the James Irvine Foundation, our pilot guide—available in English and Spanish—will cover all of the statewide California ballot measures. And it’s already shining a light on the interests vying to influence citizens’ votes. For instance, the site reveals that tobacco companies and their allies contributed $47 million to defeat Proposition 29 — outraising supporting groups 4:1. Our findings have been spread by CNN, the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, CBS news, and many others. MapLight is also partnering with NALEO and the Greenlining Institute to ensure this resource benefits the wide diversity of California’s electorate.

With funding from the Kaphan Foundation, MapLight will be expanding our Voter Guide to states and cities across the country. Our guide for California ballot measures can be found at http://maplight.org/voter.

Interested in creating a guide to ballot measures for your own state or city? Write to us at info@maplight.org.

MapLight partners with Tableau to help citizens visualize influence

In a collaboration with Tableau Software, MapLight has created interactive visualizations that make monetary influence easier to see and share.

“Who Owns Your State’s Members of Congress?” displays logos of the top contributing company or organization to each state’s sitting senators and representatives, making it possible to see which groups are seeking influence across the country. Clicking a logo shows the top five contributing groups to all members of Congress from that state. Out of thousands of Tableau “vizzes,” “Who Owns Your State?” was the #70 most viewed in the first quarter of 2012; among the top 100, it ranked as the #24 most interacted-with and the #27 most viewed in the category of politics and government. To view it yourself, go to http://maplt.org/xW7aWp.

Who Owns Your State’s Members of Congress?

Pick a Region

[All]
MapLight partners with Tableau to help citizens visualize influence

Clicking on a pie chart in our “State of Influence: The Origins of Super PAC Money” viz reveals contributions to super PACs from individual cities in that state. A drop-down menu allows candidate comparisons and maps the geographic distribution of individual contributions to candidate-supporting super PACs. Check it out at http://maplt.org/IzCbbn.

California legislators: Pass the DISCLOSE Act

In 2010, spending on California ballot measures topped $235 million—and came largely from interests with dubious monikers like “California Jobs Initiative” or “Stop Hidden Taxes.” MapLight proudly endorses the California DISCLOSE Act (A.B. 1648), which will bring these shadowy funders to light. Among its key transparency provisions, this legislation would require political ads on TV, radio, print, mailers, and websites to identify the following:

- The names and logos of the three largest funders—clearly displayed in the ads themselves.
- The three largest actual contributors, regardless of how many groups or committees their donations have passed through.
- Websites with further disclosure, including a link to the Secretary of State’s website.

This bill would be a huge win for democracy in California, allowing citizens to give proper weight to the different messages they hear and make informed decisions at the ballot box. To lend your voice in support, please visit http://bit.ly/qOXnAD.

“Goodnight Democracy” spreads a Citizens United wake-up call

MapLight’s very own Jay Costa has penned a satire based on the children’s classic “Goodnight Moon” that warns against the increased political spending unleashed by Citizens United. “Goodnight Democracy” laments that corporations can now purchase “political ads with unlimited dollars/And drown out speech of those whose checkbooks are smaller” and ends with a two-page breakdown of the undemocratic effects of the Supreme Court’s decision.

“Goodnight Democracy” is a project of Rootstrikers, a grassroots organization led by MapLight board member Lawrence Lessig that fights the corrupting influence of money in politics: the root of America’s problems. The book is available to download, share, and remix from http://www.goodnightdemocracy.com/.
What light does your new film, “Heist: Who Stole the American Dream?,” shed on the topic of money in politics?

“Heist” takes a long view of what’s happened to America and the American economy over the last 40 years, and it shows that there’s been an orchestrated takeover of the government by corporate interests, beginning with a confidential memo known as the Powell Memo written by a soon-to-be Supreme Court justice [Lewis Franklin Powell, Jr.] who was a corporate attorney representing tobacco companies at the time. And it shows that, over a period of time, corporations did in fact take over.

What do you find most challenging about corporations’ influence on government?

The real challenge is two-fold: number one, we have to get money out of politics, meaning we have to have public financing of elections, which is very, very difficult to have legislated given the current structure of Congress and how they get elected. They’re being funded by corporations. The other side of the problem is that we have a two-party system in this country, and the two parties like it that way. They don’t really want insurgent political parties challenging them. So it’s very difficult for third parties to emerge in this country and to gain traction.

What do you hope people get out of your film?

We want people to be outraged, and they are. And we have a whole closing section of the movie in which we begin to show how people need to get off the couch and stop pointing and clicking and get active. We show a national policy prescription, like public financing of elections, but we also talk about things people can do in their local communities and by themselves, like moving your money into a credit union. That’s the biggest way to starve the financial institutions and say, “You can’t play with our money on Wall Street.”

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

One of these things is the Move to Amend movement, which is to amend the constitution declaring that corporations are not people and are not allowed to buy their way into power. That’s terribly, terribly important if we’re going to take back our democracy.

What would you want other people to know about MapLight and your experiences with the organization?

I’ve been a contributor to MapLight since its beginning. I’ve done that because Dan Newman has made it very clear with his work that it is incredibly important to show the relationship between corporate donations to the pockets of legislators both at the state and national level and the resulting legislation.

What the public needs to understand is that, not only are these corporations donating to legislators, but they also provide lobbyists who write up the laws that these legislators then introduce into either state houses or Congress. So what it means is that our democracy has been hijacked. MapLight is doing a great job of shining a light on this new dynamic in what’s supposed to be our people-centered democracy of, by, and for the people. It’s no longer that. It’s by and for the corporations.

We hope that our film makes the kind of noise in people’s heads that will snap them out of denial so that they will seek out organizations like MapLight who are doing the people’s work.

What must happen to realize substantive change in the role that money plays in the political process?

People need to think deeply about how they are making their political contributions and how insistent they are with people they are providing money to that they make public financing of elections their central focus for the next couple years. Because if they don’t do that, they’re wasting their time, their money, and we will lose the entire democratic structure that the founding fathers had in mind. In addition, the Citizens United decision must be overturned by a constitutional amendment, so that corporate money can no longer corrupt our country.

Donald Goldmacher is a longtime filmmaker, labor advocate, activist, and community psychiatrist with decades of experience documenting and participating in social change. Information on "Heist: Who Stole the American Dream?" including a 22-minute special cut, can be found at http://heist-themovie.com.
MapLight data drives advocacy for homeowner protections

The multi-issue organizing network Courage Campaign is using MapLight data in their “Foreclosure Flashlight,” an advocacy webpage promoting a package of reforms known as the Homeowner Bill of Rights. The webpage spotlights the 19 members of the California Assembly and Senate Banking committees who will cast the first votes on the legislation, which would institute standards of fairness and transparency in the mortgage process and enhance law enforcement to defend homeowner rights.

By connecting MapLight’s mortgage industry contribution data with the lawmakers’ votes on past homeowner protection bills and the number of foreclosures in their home counties, Courage Campaign makes a compelling case to legislators and citizens alike to curb monetary influence in government. Their Foreclosure Flashlight can be found at http://bit.ly/Hw198q.

The Foreclosure Flashlight’s spotlight on California Senate Banking Committee Chair Juan Vargas, using MapLight data.