The Supreme Court decision in McCutcheon v. FEC puts American democracy in peril. Prior to the decision, a donor was limited to a political contribution cap of $123,200. With this ruling, wealthy donors can now give more than $3.5 million in aggregate directly to favored candidates, parties, and committees.

The Supreme Court majority has handed further control of our government to the super rich. It expanded the power of the few hundred Americans who will now spend millions of dollars paying for their favorite candidates to get elected, at the expense of everyone else.

Even Justice Breyer—joined in his dissent by Justices Ginsburg, Sotomayor, and Kagan—writes, “Today’s decision eviscerates our Nation’s campaign finance laws, leaving a remnant incapable of dealing with the grave problems of democratic legitimacy that those laws were intended to resolve.”

The Supreme Court based its decision in part on the absurd notion that relentless fundraising and special access by campaign contributors don’t influence lawmakers’ decisions. Yet MapLight has shown, on issue after issue, that how lawmakers vote correlates with what industries contribute to their campaigns. Though the Court’s logic comes from a fantasy “through the looking glass” world, it is all of us in the real world that unfortunately have to live with the consequences.

But there is hope. Americans are already living in a post-Citizens United environment. The majority decision in McCutcheon v. FEC will galvanize millions across the country to fight for public funding of elections and other changes needed to make our legislators work for we, the people. It is up to those of us who recognize the pernicious nature of our money and politics system to make our voices heard and keep fighting until we achieve reform.

Shining light on dark money

The Citizens United v. FEC decision opened the floodgates for unlimited political spending by groups with no requirement to disclose their donors, contributing to the most expensive elections in history and adding more secrecy around political money. MapLight produced a series of interactive visualizations exposing the rise of this “dark money” and its impact on U.S. elections.

The first of these visualizations, “‘Social Welfare’ Groups Dominate Dark Money Spending on Congressional Elections,” illustrates the dramatic increase of dark money spending over the past several elections, the vast majority coming from 501(c)(4) nonprofits classified as “social welfare” organizations. From 2010—the year Citizens United was decided—to 2012, congressional election spending by 501(c) (4) nonprofits rose 60%, from $84 million to $133 million.

Our next two visualizations (see inside) examine dark money’s role in the last Senate race. “Toss-Up Senate Races Are Key Targets for Dark Money” reveals that election spending by dark money groups was greatly concentrated in “toss-up” elections (colored yellow) as opposed to “solid” or “leaning” races (colored red or blue according to the favored candidate’s party), as ranked by the New York Times. The higher the possibility...
COMCAST LINES POCKETS OF SUBCOMMITTEE WITH JURISDICTION OVER FCC

Cable giant Comcast Corp. rocked headlines with the announcement that it intends to combine with its chief rival, Time Warner Inc. This potential merger, which would consolidate the two largest cable companies in the U.S., requires regulatory approval from the FCC and others to move forward.

Following the money behind the story, MapLight found that Comcast has been a top corporate donor to members of Congress, focusing much of its giving on the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology—which has jurisdiction over the FCC. Key findings include that, from January 1, 2001 to December 31, 2012, Comcast has given:

- $6,678,446 to House members serving in the 109th, 110th, 111th, and 112th Congresses.
- $853,525 to House members of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology.
- $53,000 to Representative Greg Walden, R-Ore., Chairman of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology.
- $100,775 to Representative John Dingell, D-Mich.—more than to any other House member. Dingell is a member of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology.

MapLight’s data on the Comcast/Time Warner merger was highlighted by The New Yorker, the San Francisco Chronicle, and many others.

SPOTLIGHT: New MapLight advisory board member

Sandy Close, Advisory Board Member, is the Executive Director of New America Media and Pacific News Service. A graduate of UC Berkeley, Sandy was formerly China editor of The Far Eastern Economic Review (Hong Kong) and founder of the Oakland-based Flatlands newspaper. In 1995, she received a MacArthur Foundation "Genius Award" Fellowship, and in 1997, she co-produced the Academy Award-winning short documentary, "Breathing Lessons.”

MapLight was one of only seven Bay Area nonprofits honored at this year’s WorldAffairs NextGen Changemakers Reception for bringing innovative technology solutions to solve global problems. President and Co-Founder Daniel G. Newman was highlighted as a WorldAffairs 2014 Civic Innovator.
Shining light on dark money

that a race’s outcome could be swayed, the more dark money poured in: dark money groups spent an average of $8.5 million to influence toss-up Senate races, 5.7 times as much as they spent on solid or leaning races.

“Dark Money in the Nevada Senate Race” offers an illuminating case study of this pattern by honing in on one of the tightest 2012 contests. Though both Nevada candidates were in a dead heat in the lead-up to voting day, the one with more dark money on his side—2.3 times more, accounting for 92% of independent expenditures made on his behalf—won out in the end.

“Toss-Up House Races Drew More Dark Money in 2012,” the final visualization in the series, confirms that dark money groups used the same modus operandi in House races as in Senate races, concentrating their money where it was most likely to sway the outcome in their favor. On average, these groups spent 12.2 times more money to influence toss-up races than on solid or leaning races ($1.1 million compared to $93,000).

MapLight’s dark money findings were cited in the Washington Post, the Huffington Post, the Kitsap Sun, and other outlets. To explore the influx of dark money yourself, check out our visualizations online:

- “‘Social Welfare’ Groups Dominate Dark Money Spending on Congressional Elections”  
  http://maplt.org/1liibpW

- “Toss-Up Senate Races Are Key Targets for Dark Money”  
  http://maplt.org/1n3ScYs

- “Dark Money in the Nevada Senate Race”  
  http://maplt.org/N9kFzE

  http://maplt.org/Ndsjcm
Need help deciding your ballot this primary season? MapLight’s got you covered.

This year, MapLight's Voter’s Edge project is offering comprehensive guides to congressional candidates and statewide ballot measures in every state's primary election. Simply visit http://votersedge.org to unlock the information you need to make your best decision, including your candidates' biographical information, speeches, ballot measure summaries, funding data, endorsements, and more.

In California, MapLight is teaming up with the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund to produce a joint Voter’s Edge site for California and publicize the site to a broad and diverse California audience. Accessible at http://votersedge.org/california, this joint project will cover not just congressional candidates but statewide candidates, state legislative candidates, statewide ballot measures, and even the local ballot measures in 50 cities and counties.

As is true for all MapLight projects, Voter’s Edge is completely nonpartisan. Our democracy needs informed civic participation to thrive, so spread the word about this project to your community! Happy voting!