The bribery allegations against California state Sen. Leland Yee expose the folly of the U.S. Supreme Court's logic in its April 2 decision in McCutcheon v. FEC, which struck down restrictions on the amount of money individuals may donate to federal campaigns in an election cycle.

The only legitimate reason to set limits on funding politicians' campaigns, according to the court's majority opinion, authored by Chief Justice John Roberts, is explicit trades of campaign dollars for action — quid pro quo corruption. The court pointedly dismissed "the possibility that an individual who spends large sums may garner 'influence over or access to' elected officials" as a reason to limit campaign donations.

The way our broken political system works, though, is that the chief place to raise money for campaigns is from industries and interest groups that want something from government. Influence is purchased all the time, whether in explicit quid pro quo trades or not, and such influence peddling is just as bad for democracy as bribery.

Reading the FBI complaint against Yee on this bribery allegation, I was struck by how his discussions with the undercover FBI agent were so similar to other lawmakers’ routine campaign fundraising. The usual fundraising and lawmaking that goes on in Sacramento and Washington is legalized bribery.

It costs $1 million, on average, to win a state senate campaign. That means raising about $10,000 a week for two years. How can any candidate raise that much money?

Simple: There’s an unlimited supply of campaign funds available from the people, companies and interests that want something from government. That’s where Yee’s money — and most of the money for political campaigns — comes from.

Putting money and politics on the map

We invite you to check out the latest addition to MapLight’s online transparency toolbox: an extensive mapping project for visualizing money and politics data geographically. We’ve unleashed three flexible, interactive map tools that make it quick and easy to spot patterns of influence nationally:

- The MapLight Voting Map charts roll call votes, so citizens can quickly learn how their representatives voted on key congressional legislation.
- Explore the MapLight Voting Map on the farm bill (shown above) at http://maplt.org/VoMdVZ.

FROM THE PRESIDENT & CO-FOUNDER

Campaign fundraising is bribery

Selling influence is what our legislators do, legally, all the time

Published on Al Jazeera America, April 2014

The real scandal in Sacramento and Washington, D.C., is not the occasional lawbreaking; it’s what’s legal.

According to the indictment, Yee allegedly received $10,000 from a campaign contributor and then wrote a letter in support of that contributor’s software firm. In addition, Yee allegedly made this trade on tape with an undercover FBI agent. (He has also been indicted for gun trafficking, which is not relevant to this discussion.) But imagine you’re state Sen. Jane Doe and you accept a $10,000 campaign contribution at a fundraiser and then a week later that contributor says to you, “By the way, my company could really use a letter of support, if you feel like it.” You say, “I’ll see what I can do,” and then you write the letter. Your behavior would be perfectly legal.

What’s the difference? For Yee, who was allegedly indiscreet enough to make such a deal explicit and to be caught on tape by the FBI, plenty. But for the rest of us citizens who must live under the distorted decisions of politicians continually focused on raising the campaign funds they need for re-election, it is a distinction without a difference.
Putting money and politics on the map

- The MapLight Legislator Map allows citizens to see where a politician is raising the most campaign contributions, as well as her top contributors from a given state.

- The MapLight Donor Map reveals where companies and organizations are targeting their political spending.

The top California contributors to new House Majority Leader Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-CA, include oil, gas, and computer technology interests. To see his top donors from other states, visit his MapLight Legislator Map at http://maplt.org/VoOxub.

Comcast spends on congressional candidates in each state, with the top six Pennsylvania targets shown above. View Comcast’s MapLight Donor Map at http://maplt.org/1hsos3m.

With these new map tools, for the first time ever, citizens will be able to instantly spot geographic patterns in the support and opposition to key bills and the role money from outside sources plays in local races. Be on the lookout for these visualizations in our research blog posts, and please tell us what you think!

MapLight

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• The MapLight Donor Map reveals where companies and organizations are targeting their political spending.

SPOTLIGHT:
MapLight’s new board members

John O’Farrell, Board Member, is a general partner at the venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. Before joining the firm, John served as Executive Vice President, Business Development at the smart-grid startup Silver Spring Networks and the data center software company Opsware Inc. John holds an MBA from Stanford Graduate School of Business, where he graduated as an Arjay Miller Scholar.

Dan Schnur, Advisory Board Member, directs the Jesse Unruh Institute of Politics at the University of Southern California and is an adjunct instructor at UC Berkeley’s Institute of Governmental Studies. He is a former chairman of the California Fair Political Practices Commission.

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U.S. Congress contributions data provided by the Center for Responsive Politics (OpenSecrets.org) and the Federal Election Commission (FEC.gov) and legislative data provided by GovTrack.us. California contributions data provided by the National Institute on Money in State Politics (FollowTheMoney.org) and the California Secretary of State (Sos.ca.gov). Wisconsin contributions data provided by the Wisconsin Democracy Campaign (WisDC.org).
Spread customized election data with Voter’s Edge API and widgets

MapLight is inviting nonprofits, news outlets, programmers, and citizen leaders to partner with us in empowering voters with the launch of our new Voter’s Edge API and widgets. Programmers can use the API, a live feed of our Voter’s Edge data, to build civic information apps and websites. Data available via the Voter’s Edge API covers state and federal candidates and ballot measures across the country, plus local candidates and ballot measures for more than 50 California cities (provided by the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund’s Smart Voter).

If you don’t have coding skills, our Voter’s Edge widgets make it easy to reach voters with their ballot information from your own website. A simple tool on the Voter’s Edge site allows anyone to build a customized widget focusing on a particular race or displaying the full Voter’s Edge site; the tool then generates a few lines of code allowing you to embed the widget anywhere on the web. We are excited to see the innovative ways these new tools will be used to support broad, informed voting this election year. To learn more about the Voter’s Edge API, visit http://maplt.org/votersedgeapi. To build your own Voter’s Edge widget, visit http://votersedge.org/get-widget.

Voter’s Edge, the API, and the widgets are made possible, in part, by the Kaphan Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Rita Allen Foundation, the Pick One Fund, and the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund’s Smart Voter donors.

With telecom money exposed, smartphone “kill switch” bill passes

This past May, California lawmakers proposed a bill requiring smartphones and tablets sold in the state to come with “kill switches” that could disable them remotely if stolen. Apple, Samsung, Verizon, and other telecom giants opposed the measure, claiming their products already possess adequate anti-theft features. Law enforcement strongly backed the bill, asserting that kill switches would reduce the high resale value of mobile devices that has made their theft the leading property crime in the United States. They also accused the wireless industry of seeking to protect the $30 billion a year it makes from the replacement of lost and stolen phones and tablets. When the bill failed to earn the simple majority needed to pass, columnist George Skelton denounced the vote in the Los Angeles Times. Using MapLight data showing that California state senators have raked in $1.4 million in contributions from the telecom industry in the last two election cycles, he charged lawmakers with prioritizing the interests of lobby groups above the public’s safety, saying “I do know strong special interest influence when I smell it.”

A week after Skelton’s article, state Senator Mark Leno reintroduced the bill, with amendments omitting tablets from the kill switch requirement and giving manufacturers more time to comply — and it passed 26-8. The bill now heads to the California state Assembly.

Campaign fundraising is bribery

MapLight, the nonprofit I head that studies money in politics, researched campaign contributions to Yee, going back several years. Some of the people mentioned in the indictment have given him campaign contributions. But overall, his campaign contribution pattern is similar to many other California Democratic legislators. For example, unions are among his top contributors; he received money from Time Warner and other companies too.

It doesn’t have to be this way. In Arizona and a half-dozen other states, laws creating public funding of elections let candidates run for office and win without dependence on big campaign donors. Former Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano was the first governor in U.S. history elected without private money. She quickly created a prescription-drug discount program for Arizona citizens and said that she couldn’t have done this if she had taken pharmaceutical firm campaign money.

The Yee affair is the third scandal to hit California’s state legislature in the past six months. These stories further erode the trust people have placed in our political institutions and the well-meaning public servants who have become tainted by these scandals. Lawmakers in Sacramento and Washington understandably don’t want the public to distrust them all equally.

But dismissing the accused as just a few bad apples hardly does justice to the situation. It’s our broken money-based political system that elects legislators who are forced to spend most of their time on transactions with special interests for campaign donations rather than on legislating for the common good. The system forces politicians to compete for money and attracts lawmakers who are good at trading money for influence. Instead of electing the best leaders, we elect the best fundraisers.

If lawmakers from Sacramento to Capitol Hill want to change the public’s perception of them, they must stand up and say, “We are going to reform the system that makes people dependent upon relentless fundraising to get elected.” Legalized bribery is bribery all the same.

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Cable industry cash decides net neutrality debate

When the FCC called for public comment on proposals for preserving an open internet, 28 members of the House of Representatives denounced classifying the internet as a public utility. In letters to the FCC, they cautioned that the plan would harm providers and consumers, “limit economic freedom and innovation,” and be “fatal to the Internet.”

MapLight found that, in the net neutrality debate, money talks. On average, representatives signing the letters have received 2.3 times more money ($26,832) from the cable industry than the average for all House members ($11,651). Republicans received 5 times more and Democrats received 1.2 times more.

Furthermore, letter signer Rep. Greg Walden, R-Ore., has received more cable money than any other House member: $109,250 over the last two years. Walden is Chairman of the Subcommittee on Communications and Technology, which has jurisdiction over the FCC.

The Los Angeles Times, the Huffington Post, Politico, Boing Boing, and many more cited MapLight’s data in their coverage of the story.

Rep. Sarbanes talks influence with MapLight

This June, Rep. John Sarbanes, D-Md., visited the MapLight office for a conversation with our staff and supporters on money and politics. Sarbanes shared the challenges and opportunities he has faced while tackling this issue at the federal level and discussed the legislation he has sponsored to curb the problem, including the Government By the People Act.