This November, Voter’s Edge empowered the nation

1,163 federal candidates. 11,039 state candidates. 137 statewide ballot measures. 360 local ballot measures. 4,312 local candidates. All 50 states. 58 California counties. English and Spanish.

That is the sweeping expanse of information provided by Voter’s Edge this past election season. For the first time ever, every U.S. voter could find meaningful, nonpartisan information to decide votes on her Congress members, state legislators, attorney general, governor, statewide ballot measures, and other state candidates—and maybe even her mayor, city auditor, local propositions, and more—in just one easy-to-access place online.

An astonishing one million unique visitors used Voter’s Edge to arm themselves with the facts behind their ballots this election season. These citizens were greeted with a new feature to facilitate thoughtful discussion on election items, “Share My Ballot,” that allowed visitors to check their ballot choices as they perused the site. With a few more clicks, they could exchange their views with friends and family over Twitter, Facebook, or email and print their choices to take with them to the polls.

In addition to informing site visitors, Voter’s Edge helped an array of journalists shine much-needed light on the interests vying to influence citizens’ choices on ballot measures and candidates. In the months preceding the November election, Voter’s Edge generated over 850 news stories that reached 32 million people through outlets including the Wall Street Journal, the Los Angeles Times, the San Francisco Chronicle, Reuters, the Orlando Sentinel, NBC San Diego, CBS San Francisco, the San Jose Mercury News, Southern California Public Radio, KQED News, Yahoo! News, the Huffington Post, Businessweek, Ars Technica, New America Media, and more.

MapLight is beyond proud that, in just two and a half years, Voter’s Edge has gone from a guide for one state’s ballot measures to a national resource helping every citizen, in every state, cast his own best votes. We are in deep gratitude to the partners who have made this project possible: the Kaphan Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and others.

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Campaign disclosure: Unions oppose law requiring clear labeling of campaign ads

Original version published in the San Jose Mercury News and others, August 2014

Unions have been vocal about the negative effects of Citizens United on democracy, correctly pointing out how the unlimited secret spending that it unleashed on campaigns has drowned out the voices of working families. But two of the biggest unions in California—the Service Employees International Union and the California Teachers Association—blocked a key bill in Sacramento that would have given voters a fighting chance by pulling back the curtain on who’s behind political ads.

The California DISCLOSE Act (SB52) is simple. It lets voters know who is paying for ballot measure ads—on the ads themselves.

Companies and unions no longer could hide behind “front groups” to keep their identities secret from voters. No more tiny on-screen text. TV ads would show the top three funders in big, readable letters on a black background.
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SPOTLIGHT: New MapLight staff

Hamsini Sridharan, Development Assistant for Major Gifts, supports MapLight’s efforts to cultivate prospects and steward existing donors. She received a B.A. with honors in Anthropology and International Studies from the University of Chicago and an M.A. in Anthropology from Columbia University.

Kaitlin Woolf, Development Associate for Major Gifts, supports MapLight’s initiative, vague language like “Paid for by ‘Stop Hidden Taxes’—Coalition of Taxpayers and Employers” would be replaced by language showing the real backers: “Ad paid for by a committee whose top funders are Chevron, American Beverage Association, and Philip Morris.”

Every election, California voters are asked to vote on a bewildering array of important and complicated ballot measures. To make thoughtful decisions about these measures, we need basic information about who is behind them—including information about those funding the ads. So why do SEIU and the CTA want to keep voters in the dark?

These two unions are among the largest spenders on election ads in California. Perhaps they think they would be less effective at buying influence if ads clearly identify them. MapLight, however, conducted voter research that shows that the support of SEIU or the CTA for a measure makes voters more likely to support the measure overall.

MapLight also found that overall voter support goes up when a measure is backed by the California Chamber of Commerce, a group that is often at odds with unions. Voters appear to want clarity into who is really behind measures.

Perhaps the SEIU and CTA are afraid they would be prevented from acting as “front groups” themselves for others’ campaign funds. The DISCLOSE Act no longer would allow the SEIU, the Chamber of Commerce, or any other group to secretly launder money to keep the true funders of political ads hidden from the public.

The CTA and SEIU, who are among the top funders of Democratic politicians in California, have already exercised their influence to stop disclosure.

On Aug. 14, the DISCLOSE Act was announced in the Assembly Appropriations Committee as proceeding on a party-line vote, in which all 12 Democrats were expected to vote in favor and all five Republicans in opposition. The final voting record shows that three Democrats switched their votes to oppose disclosure: Sebastian Ridley-Thomas recorded his vote as “no.” Bill Quirk and Jimmy Gomez recorded theirs as “abstain.” All three lawmakers received campaign funds from both the CTA and SEIU.

Union opposition to the bill made it so unlikely to pass that the DISCLOSE Act sponsors opted out of pursuing an Assembly floor vote this session altogether.

Why single out the CTA and SEIU for their opposition to the bill? Because these two unions are among the only groups in the entire state in opposition. Four hundred groups and leaders have endorsed the bill, along with more than 70,000 Californians who have signed petitions for it.

If you know one of the 700,000 members of SEIU in California, ask them if they’d rather know who’s really behind political ads, or if they’d rather be kept in the dark. And if you know any teachers, ask them why their union wants to hide the basic information we all need to be informed California citizens.

Most importantly, if you’re a voter, ask Assembly members Ridley-Thomas, Gomez, and Quirk and every other legislator, When the DISCLOSE Act comes to its final vote, are you going to vote to let ballot measure funders hide because unions who give you money are telling you to vote that way, or are you going to stand with voters and give us the transparency we need?

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Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, the Rita Allen Foundation, California Forward, the Pick One Fund, and individual League of Women Voters of California Education Fund’s Smart Voter and MapLight donors. Our detailed coverage of election items for California cities and counties was provided through a partnership with the League of Women Voters of California Education Fund. Share My Ballot was made possible by California Forward.

cont. from page 1
Money, interests, votes—and now lobbying and personal assets

Does your representative work for the good of the public—or his own purse? How much does Exxon Mobil spend to lobby Congress on energy policy, or General Electric on clean air and water rules? For the first time ever, citizens can answer these questions quickly and easily, with MapLight’s new Personal Financial Disclosure and Lobbying Search tools.

We have expanded our online influence database to connect not just campaign contributions, lawmakers, and legislative votes, but the financial interests of members of Congress and federal lobbying data as well. The MapLight website now features sophisticated tools for finding patterns in these new data sets with the click of a mouse—a game changer for public accountability.

Our Personal Financial Disclosure Search tool allows users to explore the financial interests of members of Congress by company, individual politician, group of politicians, or session of Congress and view and sort the results right in their browsers. The investments covered include stocks, bonds, real estate holdings, and more. Our Lobbying Search tool tracks the lobbying activities of nearly 40,000 companies, trade associations, and other groups. Clicking the “View Details” arrow by a group’s name opens a page detailing their lobbying activity by year, including the firms they hired each quarter, how much each was paid, and issues they lobbied Congress on.

Adding these new sets to our existing money and politics database is a huge step toward fully illuminating the influence machine biasing our government toward special interests and away from the public good. We are excited that news outlets like CNN Money, CNBC, the Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, Fortune, GigaOm, Boing Boing, Ars Technica, and more have already uncovered hard-hitting influence stories with this liberated data.

You can investigate the personal financial disclosures of your representative at http://maplight.org/1qats2E and the top spenders on federal lobbying at http://maplight.org/1uHcvR2.

The default view showcases a summary table of the most commonly held stocks by sitting members of Congress, the number of members investing in each stock, and the value of their investments, surfacing top points of interest.

The default view ranks the biggest buyers of congressional lobbying. A graph at the top of the tool tracks the overall spending of a group on congressional lobbying by year and breaks down the spending by quarter.
Defense money behind militarized police response in Ferguson

The day after reports out of Ferguson, Missouri described sniper rifles being trained on unarmed protesters and journalists getting tear gassed and arrested, MapLight revealed how defense cash set the stage for the shocking police response.

Two months prior to Michael Brown’s killing, the House of Representatives voted to continue a Department of Defense program that has transferred hundreds of thousands of pieces of free military equipment to police agencies nationwide, including machine guns, ammunition magazines, silencers, armored cars, aircraft, camouflage, and night vision equipment. MapLight found that:

- Representatives who voted to continue the military-transfer program received 73% more money from the defense industry than those who voted to defund it.
- Of the 59 representatives who collected upwards of $100,000 in defense contributions, only four voted against the program.

Our report generated over 50 stories in outlets including The Economist, La Opinión, the Washington Post, CBS News, Mother Jones, Roll Call, International Business Times, the Huffington Post, Politico, and Boing Boing and became our most-shared Facebook post of all time, reaching 22,000 people. We are proud to have shed much-needed light on how our broken system of campaign finance contributed to the events in Ferguson, an essential angle that would have otherwise remained invisible in national discourse.