MapLight helps make the case for reform in crucial caucus state

With presidential candidates and national press criss-crossing Iowa, MapLight has teamed up with Iowa Pays the Price, a grassroots advocacy effort to bring the need for money and politics reform home to Iowans. MapLight is providing Iowa Pays the Price with custom research about how money in politics affects Iowans' daily lives. To support their campaign launch, we published a white paper, Iowa Campaign Spending Reaches Historic Levels, revealing that after the 2010 Citizens United decision, spending on congressional campaigns in Iowa jumped 327%—while outside spending alone jumped 1,239%. Iowa’s U.S. Senate races saw the most dramatic increase: the 2010 Senate race drew just $300,000 in outside spending, while in 2014, outside groups poured $61.5 million into Iowa’s Senate contest—making it the third most expensive race nationwide that year.

Our continuing research partnership has garnered significant media attention on the ground in Iowa, including in the Des Moines Register, the state’s largest daily paper, and on Iowa Public Television. To further fuel this attention-grabbing campaign, MapLight is at work

continued on page 3

MapLight exposes industry influence on tax filings

Every year, Americans wrestle with dense, confusing paperwork in order to file their taxes. Meanwhile, efforts to reform the system stagnate in Congress: in 2011, Rep. Jim Cooper, D-Tenn., introduced a bill to implement a “return-free” filing system that would have streamlined most people’s tax returns and is already in use in Denmark, Spain, and other countries. Yet this bill never even came up for a committee vote, and the few subsequent attempts to reform the filing process have petered out.

MapLight investigated and found several ties linking our convoluted, time-consuming, and expensive tax filing system to moneyed special interests. Digging into the spending of the entities that profit most from our long, complicated tax forms—tax prep companies, including H&R Block, Intuit (which owns Turbo Tax), the American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, Jackson Hewitt, and the National Society of Accountants—we found that:

• Tax prep companies have spent a combined $35 million lobbying Congress and federal agencies since 2011.
• The tax prep industry has contributed nearly $2.6 million to congressional candidates since 2011.
• During the 2014 election cycle, members of the House Ways and Means Committee—which has jurisdiction over the IRS and failed to bring the return-free filing bill to a vote—received 2.8 times more money ($7,072) from the industry compared to the average representative ($2,509).

Our research was quickly picked up by advocates for money and politics reform: ReThink Media sent their email list a rapid response briefing with several sample Tweets that featured our data, and as a result, our findings were spread by over 80 groups and individuals on social media, including Public Citizen, Free Speech for People, Every Voice, and representatives from Open Democracy, the Sunlight Foundation, and Films for Change. Grassroots activist group Stamp Stampede highlighted our work on their blog, urging readers to join their campaign to raise awareness of money’s influence. In addition, our analysis reached 2,700 people on Facebook and was cited in the Los Angeles Times, Breitbart, Sacramento Today, the Wichita Eagle, Truthout, BillMoyers.com, Corporate Counsel, and more.
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INTERNS
Tyler Finn
Frances Huang
Emily Johnson

SPOTLIGHT: New MapLight staff

Jiali Li, Researcher, analyzes public statements of companies and interest groups to discern their organizational stance on major pieces of legislation and investigates the progress of bills. Jiali received a B.A. from Cornell University with High Honors in Government and Statistical Science, as well as a minor in East Asian Studies.

Chacha Sikes, Software Engineer, brings a user-centered design and development approach to Voter’s Edge. She has a degree in American History and Anthropology from Bard College, extensive experience in iterative public design through years of work in science museums, and was in the inaugural class of Code for America Fellows.

SPOTLIGHT: MapLight’s interns

Tyler Finn

Studying: Philosophy, Politics, & Economics, Claremont McKenna College
Hobbies: marathons, tennis, action sports

Why MapLight? Growing up in Atheron, California, it is clear to me that contributions can result in access to powerful politicians. I want to ensure that those contributions and lobbying efforts are disclosed clearly and effectively.

Frances Huang

Studying: Political Science & Statistics, UC Berkeley
Hobbies: hiking, cycling, chess, cello, table tennis

Why MapLight? We should increase transparency and inform the public of the players on the political field. By interning with MapLight, I hope to contribute to this process and gain insight into how money shapes U.S. politics.

Emily Johnson

Studying: Undeclared, Harvard College
Hobbies: surfing, singing, hiking, Netflix

Why MapLight? I was heavily influenced by working for my father’s run for Congress as a Tea Party Republican. I became really jaded by the amount of money that went into each campaign and began to think a lot about the political ramifications of this.

Alec Kassin

Studying: American Studies & Public Policy, UC Berkeley
Hobbies: cycling, travel, salsa dancing, French, Bruce Springsteen

Why MapLight? After interning in Washington, D.C. last summer, I see getting money out of politics as a prerequisite to passing almost any meaningful legislation and to reversing the trend of wealth inequality.

Ezer Pamintuan

Studying: Political Science & Philosophy, UC Berkeley
Hobbies: piano, classic films, museums, philosophy

Why MapLight? I have chosen to work at MapLight because I want to help cast light on money’s effect on the public square, and in so doing, give the public the knowledge needed to restore genuine democracy.
Defense companies spend millions to influence Congress

As the battle for a $55 billion contract to build the Air Force’s next stealth bomber unfolded, MapLight dug into influence bought by the bidders. We discovered that:

• During the first quarter of 2015, the three defense contractors seeking the stealth bomber contract—Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin—spent $9.7 million on lobbying.
• The PACs of Boeing, Northrop Grumman, and Lockheed Martin contributed, on average, 2.1 times more money ($27,000) to members of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee compared to the average given to all members of the House ($12,838).

We also found that defense interests dominated the list of top corporate PAC contributors to Congress during the first quarter of 2015. Honeywell’s corporate PAC ranked first with $553,999, joined by stealth bomber contract bidders Northrop Grumman (second, $416,900) and Boeing (fifth, $304,500).

Our defense industry data was picked up by media outlets Fortune and BillMoyers.com. In addition, the American Friends Service Committee used MapLight’s data on the lobbying spending of stealth bomber contract bidders in their Governing Under the Influence project, which seeks to “bird-dog” and challenge presidential candidates in Iowa and New Hampshire on corporate influence on policy. They presented our data at a symposium exploring the effects of corporate influence and ways different groups are working toward change and have used it to prepare targeted questions for candidates.

We’re hiring!

MapLight is currently expanding our team. Come work with us on the cutting edge of government transparency and accountability!

We are seeking an experienced and self-directed Managing Editor to lead MapLight’s editorial strategy into the next generation of journalism. While overseeing a team of writers producing data-driven news stories, the Managing Editor will ensure the quality, accuracy, and timeliness of all content that we publish. Successful candidates must have experience working in a fast-paced newsroom, possess solid news judgment, and be able to quickly adjust priorities to accommodate a 24-hour news cycle.

We are also seeking an experienced Communications Director and Senior Communications Manager. These individuals will develop and execute a variety of MapLight’s communications programs and must possess strong computer, research, analytic, and writing skills.

In addition, our development department is seeking an exceptionally organized Administrative Assistant with computer and web savvy and excellent communication skills.

For more detail, and a list of all open positions at MapLight, please visit http://maplight.org/jobs.
Fast approval of controversial trade bill bought by special interests

In June, Congress approved the Trade Promotion Authority, a measure to “fast track” ratification of the controversial Trans-Pacific Partnership—slated to be the most significant treaty on international trade since NAFTA. MapLight dug into the interests who bought a say in the conversation, including pharmaceutical manufacturers, auto manufacturers, multinational oil and gas producers, the motion picture industry, and the retail industry, and found that:

• Industries supporting the TPA bill that passed the Senate gave 8.6 times more money ($197.9 million) to members of the House compared to industries opposing the bill ($23.1 million).

• Industries supporting the version of the TPA bill that passed the House gave 9 times more money ($218.4 million) to current senators, compared to the $23.2 million given by industries opposing the bill.

Our findings sparked over 30 news stories, with coverage in the Washington Post, the International Business Times, CNBC, the Times-Picayune, the Star Tribune, and more, and earned 8,000 upvotes on Reddit. Common Cause cited our findings in their issue brief and fact sheet on the TPP, and ReThink Media urged their supporters to spread the research and press lawmakers to #GetMoneyOut of politics.