

Congressional Forecast

Brian Clifton, Michael Milazzo

The problem we are addressing is how the American public is not properly informed about the extent that corrupting power that money has over politics in this country. Instead of representing the concerns of the people, politicians have become channels through which corporations and lobbyists distort the law for the sake of increasing profits. But this is not necessarily the fault of individual politicians. This is an incredibly complex issue and we believe that it can be solved by interpreting open government data and building a clear and engaging narrative.

The US political system has been twisted from one that is driven by the needs of the people to one driven by profit. Simply running for office requires enormous sums of money and keeping your place in office requires significantly more, forcing politicians to fundraise for 70% of their day. If our representatives are receiving such massive amounts of money for operations costs and want to keep receiving them, then they have to prove that they have the contributors' interests in mind by giving them a return on their investment in the form of beneficial political action. Otherwise, a competing politician who will give contributors a better return on investment will receive more contributions during the next election cycle. The laws that once limited the power that outside industries have over the government have been loosened over time by lobbyists who wrote new laws and donated

to politicians in order to ensure the legislation's passage. This change has quickly gutted the law's relationship to the interests of the American people.

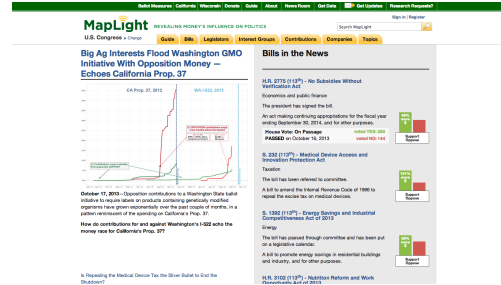
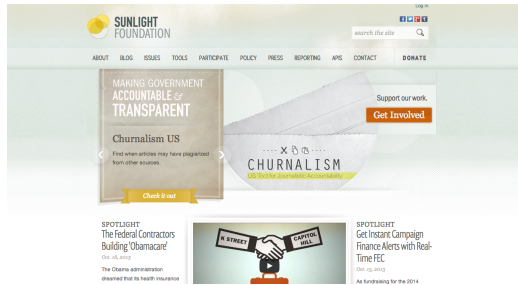
This is a dire situation, and it is incredibly important for the American people to understand the negative effects this political environment has on the decisions that our members of Congress make concerning everything from the global climate, US and international economies, foreign policy, national defense, general social welfare, and the needs of an overwhelming majority of the citizens of this country.

After diving deeper into the problem and researching previous academic work in the political science field, we learned much about the challenges of clearly linking campaign contributions with voting tendencies. While outside donations to politicians must be reported and are then tracked by the Federal Election Commission, there are numerous ways to get around these laws. Some of these loopholes are extremely simple and seemingly trivial, but nonetheless invite abuses. For example: standing and not sitting down at lunch with a lobbyist signifies, in the eyes of the law, that what happened was technically not a "meeting" so donations can be made this way; or that a lobbyist can't personally donate to a politician, but the lobbyist's spouse can. Another tactic for having a politician do the bidding of a lobbyist is to promise them a job as a lobbyist once the politician has left the service of the government. If approached, the member of Congress, or congressional staffer, stands to gain a massive increase in salary, which for a member of Congress is on average a 1452%. When former lobbyist Jack Abramoff was continually

making this offer to politicians in the early 2000's, he said that politicians and staffers would go out of their way to come up with creative (and corrupt) ways to support the corporate interests Abramoff represented, solely based on the promise of better pay. These practices make up a potentially large, and nearly impossible to track, component in the picture of how politicians are influenced by money.

Learning about the necessity of constant fundraising and the wide range of means through which lobbyists influence politics has forced us to focus our approach and think of the entirety of the system from a more frustrated, but empathetic position.

Joe Goldman of the Omidyar Network (<http://www.omidyar.com/>) has played mentor to us, directing our attention to a wide pool of experts that has proven invaluable, and has pushed our project in a more focused and achievable direction. This was confirmed when we reached out to the organizations recommended by our mentor, and we described a possible project we want to work on was met with enthusiasm, as well as specific features we want to see matched up with directions they were heading in too. This is how we arrived at the idea of creating a website that uses political contributions to predict congressional votes on legislation.

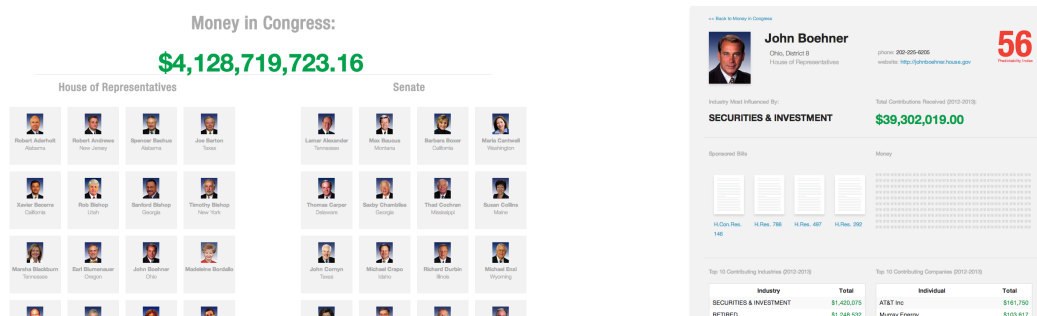


Building a predictive tool has several advantages to simple visualization. If we can predict congressional votes based primarily on campaign contributions and donations, the assertion that congress is corrupt becomes irrefutable. Verifiable proof that money correlates directly to political influence for donors could prove to be a wakeup call to many Americans and news outlets. A predictive tool would also provide an advantage to activists and political groups who are campaigning for or against a particular piece of legislation. It would show them exactly which politicians are most likely to vote against their interests, allowing them to counter the influence of particular donors with their own money, or with pressure from their constituents.

There are a number of existing organization such as the Sunlight Foundation (<http://sunlightfoundation.com/>), Maplight.org (<http://maplight.org/>), the Center for Responsive Politics (<http://www.opensecrets.org/>), and the Campaign Finance Institute (<http://www.cfinst.org>), amongst others, who are also attempting to tackle the problem of representing the power that money has on the political system. In our opinion, however, they all lack methods that help to visualize the extent of the problem in a way that someone

who is relatively uninformed can quickly get a sense of the scope of the problem. We believe the key impactful techniques missing amongst these websites are interactive information graphics that foster explorations into and with the data. By giving the users a visual narrative that summarizes the problems, while enabling them to dig into the data themselves we can help them better understand how money influences politics. We have begun developing an online platform that will eventually include these strategies. A rudimentary sketch of the style and functionality can be found at the link below:

<http://briancliftonstudio.com/CLweb/CongressMembers/>



This site currently draws in data from two primary API's, Sunlight Foundation's "Influence Explorer" API and the GovTrack.us API. These database are used give an estimate of the total money contributed to each politician in congress. Selecting an individual politician will bring you to a page that gives the breakdown of the top ten highest contributing industries,

based on the standard categories outlined by the National Institute on Money in State Politics, and of those industrial categories, what money they are receiving from which companies. In the future, the data presented on the site will include a robust combination of data from a few more APIs to enable a comprehensive picture of the data available on each politician and the ways in which money relates to their position in office.

As we have stated, though, there are a huge number of influences on congressional voting, which makes building a predictive model very difficult. This is why we plan on building a model that is as flexible as possible, meaning that we will be able to add or subtract factors and change the value of those factors whenever we need to. These influences will be informed by data on past votes; the voting history of a particular politician will inform the model as to which factors should be weighted most heavily when calculating the final potential that a politician will vote a particular way.

Communicating with our mentor, Joe Goldman, eventually gave us the opportunity to interview Jay Costa, the Program Director at Maplight.org. Costa leads Maplight's web and data projects, making him an ideal person to get feedback from. We explained our concept and proceeded to get some great information from him. Here are some paraphrased points from the interview:

Michael Milazzo & Brian Clifton: What are the approaches you've used to map who is receiving how much money from whom?

Jay Costa:

- look at contribution given by industry, as categorized by Open Secrets to legislators voting on bill
- It's tough to argue that a contribution of 2500 - 5000 will make or break a campaign
- look at organizations that are supporting or opposing legislation
- look at industries related to a piece of legislation
- Maplight started to do more with specific companies (we liked this direction, and the idea of working with journalists who are already following these companies)
- compare popular interest with a specific companies influence

MM & BC: What techniques have you been using to gauge the weakness of politicians to the influence of money?

JC:

- for any given bill we need to look at the connections and see the broader picture concerned because it is hard to tell a complete story
- there are 1000s of votes that happen and Maplight analyzes 600-800 bills per session focusing on the most high profile and news worthy
- delving into the votes to get the broad swath of supporting and opposing, vs. covering more (focused on delving into the votes)
- Maplight focuses on top level figures

- for Maplight, there are always serious disclaimers due to the number of bills researched and the difficulty in getting the whole picture

On this topic, Jay asked us about our model for determining a politician's influence. We gave him a description close to the one previously mentioned. Maplight has thought about the predictive tool a lot, but it's tough to get it to reliably give a result. Based on this, he brought up some factors that we will have to consider when building the tool:

- party affiliation is a huge influence due to the amount of money contributed. It's also very difficult to track party donations.
- it's hard to isolate a particular industry's impact on a vote when there are so many involved
- the amount of money
- the chamber the politician is in
- the economy of the state they represent
- the length of time they've been in politics
- special interest groups that have political clout, but don't donate can be very important to a member's district. They might lose a lot of votes if they aren't sensitive to the group. This will poke holes in model

Overall, he agreed with our initial idea that it's best to be flexible and have the ability to insert or subtract factors, or add filters. He emphasized the importance of including all of

the correct ones in order to build an accurate tool. This, he believed was the key to making our website successful in achieving credibility with the public and influencing their political decisions.

In addition to the people and organization who are tracking the data and creating platforms for this information, our mentor directed us to the work of political scientist Lynda Powell. He suggested we take a look at her most recent book *The Influence of Campaign Contributions in State Legislatures* (2012), which has been winning awards and is frequently discussed in political science academia. Her work in this book has been integral to the development of our project because she has explored the various ways money, the promise of money, and the culture of influence in congressional politics has created the corrupted system it currently is. She develops a comprehensive picture of how, why, and in what ways politicians are influenced by contributions through a series of academic researching strategies, such as polling members of Congress asking if they thought their political colleagues are corrupt, accounting for how the representatives' state economies can skew the amount of money donated to a campaign, what chamber the politician operates within, for how many years, and other factors that aren't typically considered as directly related, but help to give a full picture of the scope of influences. Building upon this work, Powell has also detailed her methodology for her analysis and in some cases described how this works algorithmically. We see this as the core of how we can begin to realistically create predictive model when, in the past, such a variety of conditions have made a tool like the one we are proposing formerly unreliable.

Moving forward, our plan is to begin to translate Powell's academic work into a computer application that can begin to be used to predict votes. This process will require numerous variations and adjustments, but we fully believe it is possible. Concurrent with developing the predictive model, we will be designing the experience of how the information the model produces in a way that can be clearly understood by people who aren't relatively involved in the political process or are uninformed of the scale in which money influences politics. This will also involve the creation of interactive infographics to allow users to dive deeper into the information in order to foster a better understanding of the problem. Finally, once the model and the experience of the web platform has been crafted into something that produces reliable result and does so cleanly and beautifully, we will enable a way for other organizations to use and build upon our work, such as a news organization reporting on a bill that is coming to the floor that has a large number of lobbyists influencing politicians to support it.

Throughout the process thus far, it has been empowering to find that our interests are met with both respect and interest by the groups we've been in touch with. Constantly improving and clarifying our message, knowing that we are connecting with people who are deeply committed to the field, and feeling that we can speak with them as peers due to the power and brevity of our emails with them, could not have occurred without the strong support and encouragement fostered by the class. The process of distilling the problem into a concise and powerful statement is something we think we've achieved, but also we recognize that

what might be strong for one audience, might not be as effective for another, so having the ability to quickly frame up our problem for the we're addressing is something we hope to improve upon. As we move forward, we hope to build a dynamic tool that can accurately predict the outcomes of congressional voting. In doing so, we believe that we can help build a more informed public who expects their representatives to act in their interest, not in the interest of large donors. We want others to share in our conviction.