

Memo on the Complex State of Political Contributions

Brian Clifton, Michael Milazzo

The problem we are addressing is that the American public is not properly informed about the 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 approximately 70% of their day. If our members of Congress 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 will receive more contributions during the next election cycle. The laws that once limited the power that outside industries have over the government, over time, have been loosened 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 of our representatives concerning everything from the global climate, US and international economies, foreign policy, national defense, social welfare, and the needs of an overwhelming majority of the citizens of this country.

The Federal Election Commission (FEC) provides troves of information related to what industries, political action committees (PACs), and individuals are contributing to which politicians and at what times.

Additionally, there is information available about the committees politicians are members of, the bills they have sponsored or co-sponsored, and the window of time allowed for voting on certain pieces of legislation. These resources have been combined in various ways by a number of non-partisan organizations such as the Sunlight Foundation, Maplight.org, the Center for Responsive Politics, the Campaign Finance Institute, amongst others. However, the information they present fails to outline the severity of what has been happening to politics in a way that is clear and engaging. What is needed are clearly designed visualizations and accessible metrics that give insight into how this takeover of the US government by lobbyists and corporations. We need to analyze the currently legal, though mostly unethical, ways this is occurring, as well as shed light on the shadowy and less trackable alternatives for influencing politicians.

We're creating *CongressionalForecast.org* to address this problem and transform our insights into a predictive system that will illustrate the strength or weakness of an individual politician in facing this corrupt system and their fidelity to the concerns of lobbyists and corporations. We need a dynamic platform that clearly shows legislation heading to the floor for a vote, the weakness of members of congress to the pressures of lobbyists in showing how likely they are to vote in support or oppose a bill, and a way to communicate the severity of this problem to the constituents. We are creating this in the hopes that they will be empowered to voice their concerns to their elected officials. We want to improve our corrupted political system and have others to share in our conviction.