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# Politi-torch: Shedding Light on 'Dark Money' Politicians

**What world problem are you concerned about?**

Political corruption caused by the influx of campaign contributions that influence decisions not in the best interest of the public. Many politicians are taking more money than ever before from Political Action Committees (PACs and Super Pacs), where the money is funneling in with no trace of origin. This is preventing us from having transparency into who is advocating for issues in congress.

**What is one statistic or quote showing that this is a major problem?** (Be sure to cite your source.)

"The winners in the 11 most competitive races in 2014 together had more than $131 million in dark money supporting them — 71 percent of the nonparty outside spending in their favor." (Vandewalker, 2015).

**What is one anecdote about how this problem might possibly play out in real life for somebody?**

An average voter would end up voting for a politician who has received large amounts of 'dark money' contributions since that candidate had far more money to spend on advertising. The politician would not have that voter's interests in mind moving forward, but only the interests tied to their largest donors. Ultimately, none of the issues that the voter wanted to be addressed would get resolved, since the politician is only interested in appeasing their largest donors. This has and would continue to play out an endless spiral of politicians accepting large donations from the wealthy, and pushing the agendas of wealthy individuals (which usually involve helping the wealthy only get wealthier), which only further enables the wealthy to continue financing these politician's campaigns.

**Within this world problem, what is one sub-problem that bothers you?**

Only the political interests of the top 1% are pertinent to elected officials. They are hardly a representation of the populous as a whole in America, yet they have more political influence than anyone. This is compounded by the fact that they live in an almost entirely different world than that of the average citizen, since most need nor want of anything outside of their economic reach.

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**What is one quote illustrating that this sub-problem is important?**

"Over two-thirds of the public believes that "the government in Washington ought to see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job", but among the wealthy only 19 percent agreed with that statement—a disparity of more than 3 to 1." (Benjamin I. Page, 2013, p. 57)

**What is one anecdote about how this sub-problem might possibly play out in real life for somebody?**

The wealthy 1% of Americans continually fuel the campaigns of politicians who will vote on bills in favor of the viewpoint of that 1%. Elected officials would then (and do) no longer advocate for the rights and interests of the majority of American voters. The system will then be designed to promote the wealthy becoming wealthier, and perpetually driving the system to disregard most American's interests over time.

**What is a second anecdote about how this sub-problem might possibly play out in real life?**

Politicians elected to office who are funded by the 1% would be incentivized to vote towards supporting the privatization of education, since wealthiest families have their children attend private schools. This would funnel money away from public institutions, further disparaging the gap between the wealthy with everyone else. With lower income families having to attend lower tier schools (primarily public school) they would be further hindered in succeeding or finding financial success later in life.

**What is one possible software system that could help to solve this problem?**

A publicly available database that displays campaign contributions for all elected officials. Were there a way for people to immediately see what funds their candidate has accepted, alongside their congressional bill voting history, can then better identify if that candidate would have their interests in mind. Additionally, surveys can be conducted to better match voters with candidates who align with their own interests, and allow voters to directly donate to candidates they align with who are not taking 'dark money'.

**What are the three most important features that this helpful software system should have?**

1. A publicly searchable database that has politicians' pictures, contact information, voting records, and history of political donations that they have received. Provide labels of those who are dark money candidates, and those who are not.

2. Searchable information regarding PAC's, what they consist of, and the trends for their donations/agendas. Provide labels for PAC's that do and do not disclose PAC donor information.

3. Rating system for candidates that easily displays their ability to be influenced by money. This could be similar to the NRA's grade system regarding gun law voting, but targeted towards rating a candidate's acceptance of dark money.

**For the 1st of these three features, why is this feature important?**

This database would allow any voter to easily identify if a candidate has their own interests at heart, or if their candidate is actually going to be heavily influence by receiving large contributions from PAC's or companies not aligned with their interests. Additionally, it would give a lot more insight into how dark money has influence their voting patterns, since it would far easier to correlate the money they received and how their voting records align with the interests of those PAC's (rather than the average voter).

**What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 1st feature?**

An American voter would look-up their local politicians that they can vote for and do a side-by-side comparison of how much each has received in donations and their voting record. They would also have their contact information for contacting their representative in the event they issue with something that politician has done (should it not currently be an election year). If they see that the candidate most aligned with them isn't taking dark money contributions, they could then send their own individual contributions to increase their support (in addition to voting for them).

**For the 2nd of these three features, why is this feature important?**

PAC's are not always required to disclose the names of those that donate to their organization. This allows a lot of money to come in from unknown places, which prevents there from being as much accountability regarding who is funding political campaigns. This feature would allow you to at least see where these PAC's are donating, and track their overall interests by seeing which candidates receive the most funds, and how that is influencing voting trends.

**What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 2nd feature?**

When viewing their candidate(s) in an election cycle, they would be able to lookup all of the PAC's that have donated to their available candidates. They could then make an informed decision on whether they think their given candidates would be aligned with their own interests. As time would go on, they could then better know which candidates to avoid, which PAC's are

not aligned with their own interests, and feel more confident that those they are voting for aren't just dark money puppets.

**For the 3rd of these three features, why is this feature important?**

Rating politicians based upon how much untraceable money they have accepted would allow everyone (not just American voters) to have a better understanding of the politician's behaviors and decisions. The rating system could have the potential to influence elections by summing up a large about of data in an easy to understand rating of that candidate. By taking how much money they have received and their voting records, we could easily see which politicians actually have the public's interest in mind.

**What is some sort of hypothetical example about how a person would use the 3rd feature?**

A person could look up any elected official (or candidate) and easily see what their money/voting rating is, so they could see how influenced that politician is. This allows a more transparent view of this politician and enables the voter to better decide whether or not that person is worth voting for (or continuing to vote for should it be outside of an election year). With some that is as easily understandable as the NRA grade system, voters would be able to understand which candidates are more deserving of individual contributions and more likely to advocate for political causes that interest the voter.

**Which of these three features is most important? Which is least important/optional? Why?**

The most important feature would be the publicly searchable database that contains the information on all politicians. This feature is at the core of anything else being viable, since the main focus is getting more accountability and insight into these politicians. The least important might ultimately be the rating system, since it might have the potential to be too reductive. It would be useful to more easily label dark money politicians, but this rating system might come under great scrutiny and could be determined to be imbalanced.

**How would you ensure that your system is economically viable?**

The system would have to be funded by donations and other non-partisan groups interested in keeping insight into campaign contributions to politicians. There are several organizations that already aggregate a majority of this data, so there would be less overhead in maintaining the system. They might even be interested in directing funds towards this project to help maintain it. The Sunlight Foundation even has an Influence Explorer API that would provide the majority of this data, and we would simply overlay other candidate information with this to provide end users with usable data about their candidates. Since the system would primarily be

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an aggregate of other data sources, it would require minimal maintenance other than systems and traffic (along with any volunteer work from developers).

The system could also be supported by small donations from politicians who aren't taking dark money contributions, since the system would favorably display their own lack of dark money donations having been taken (thus further establishing the given politician as being an advocate for the people). The hope is that the system overall would be able to run for quite a long time on the generosity of only a few wealthy individuals who would like to see federal campaign finance laws reformed.

**How would the world be a better place if the system was actually implemented?**

By exposing the campaign contributions in a more readable and understandable way, we would make elections far more transparent. It would be much easier for candidates to be exposed for receiving excessive contributions. This could spark investigations or legislation into possible causing federal campaign finance reform, even possibly turning over Citizens United. The public should be more aware of how far their politicians are inside of the pockets of corporations and the 1%. Funds being directed from many small donors could then be encouraged and properly directed towards the candidates who refuse to take dark money contributions.

**What are your references?** (On each line, put a bracketed number such as [4] and then the reference. It is a good idea to leave blank lines between the references.)

## Works Cited

[1]Benjamin I. Page, L. M. (2013). Democracy and the Policy Preferences of Wealthy Americans. *Perspectives on Politics*, 51-73.

[2]Vandewalker, I. (2015). *Election Spending 2014: Outside Spending in Senate Races Since Citizens United.* Retrieved from Brennan Center for Justice: http://www.brennancenter.org/publication/election-spending-2014-outside-spending-senate-races-citizens-united