

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

## The Problem

Political corruption is an issue most of us have heard of, but rarely do we know exact instances of this. The impact of money in politics is unprecedented compared to any other time in our country. Politicians are taking more money than ever before due to the advent of Political Action Committees (PAC) and Super Political Action Committees (SuperPAC). Money can funnel into those PACs and SuperPACs that is nearly untraceable since the donations don't have to be tracked as closely as individual contributions to candidates. This prevents us from being able to have a fair and transparent political environment where we can trust that our elected officials have our interests in mind, rather than the interests of the wealthiest 1%.

We can already see in 2014 that 11 of the most competitive races combined had more than \$131 million in dark money backing their campaigns (Vandewalker, 2015). Most voters are not even aware of this level of spending going on or how it influences the candidates that they vote into office. When politicians take hundreds of thousands of dollars from these SuperPACs and PACs, they end up being beholden to their interests. This is also the same exact reason that it's not possible to pass any form of campaign finance reform, since those that abuse this system keep backing candidates who will never vote against it (otherwise their funding would be cutoff). In addition to no campaign finance reform, these same politicians continually attempt to leave open tax loopholes and pass legislation that allows the wealthy to only get wealthier. As they get more wealth, they donate more to their campaigns so that they could make more money. It's an endless cycle.

We are now stuck with a majority of our elected officials only having the interests of the top 1% of our population. These people live in a different world than the rest of us, and do not face nearly the same burdens that we all do. Basic needs are met fairly easily, and it's extremely difficult to spend millions of dollars all the time unless you're

living an extremely lavish lifestyle. “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). We already see that they have a greatly differing view of how the government should treat the populous, despite being in the overwhelming minority of voters in the United States.

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.

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 (School Spending Increases Linked to Better Outcomes for Poor Students, 2014). As we continue to funnel money away, poor children will do worse and have lower future expected earnings, while children from wealthier families will continue to have success and high wages in the future.

### **The Solution**

We can start to combat this by creating 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’.

To make this system successful, we would need it to have the following 3 key features:

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.

### **Feature 1**

The 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).

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).

### **Feature 2**

Since PAC's are not always required to disclose the names of those that donate to their organization, this would allow you to start seeing which politicians are taking donations from questionable PACs and SuperPACs. 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. Over time, it would be possible to start seeing which candidates they support, and track the voting records of those candidates to map the agendas that these PACs and SuperPACs are pushing.

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.

### **Feature 3**

Being able to rate 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 amount 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.

A voter could look up any elected official (or candidate) and easily see what their money to 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.

### **Final Notes**

The most important feature would be the publicly searchable database that contains information on all politician's donation records and voting records. 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.

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 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. Additionally, special interest groups that don't have the backing to afford expensive lobbyists like other well-funded groups can help by volunteering or helping promote more donations be directed to our system to encourage voters to vote against big money politicians.

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.

Without taking action against big money in politics and fighting for reform, we are doomed to become a complete oligarchy. We have been heading down this path for some time with the protection of capitalism is equal to freedom, but fail to see that capitalism is now working to oppress those with less money. We can work against all of its with something as simple as data and technology. Using them to lift the veil that politicians have been hiding behind for too long. Once we begin to follow the money around, it becomes much easy for other causes to shed light on our political system and direct funds and efforts to the appropriate places. If there is one thing that I would want someone to take away from this idea of a system, is it true that knowledge is power, and we need to disseminate that knowledge to everyone.

## Works Cited

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