

Open Secrets: Using the Internet to Learn about the Influence of Money in Politics

Scott K. Scheuerell

With the 2008 election quickly approaching, candidates continue the scramble to fund their campaigns—collecting money from individuals, corporations, and labor unions. Students can learn a great deal about our political system by examining how politicians are financed. The vast majority of our high school students do not understand the influence of money in our political system.

When I was a high school social studies teacher, I was always looking for ways to utilize the Internet to engage my students in civics. My students, like the vast majority of our nation's high school students, were avid users of the Internet at home. In fact, 96 percent of high school students reportedly use the Internet.¹ A typical high school student conducts research first on the Internet.² David Hicks et al. note that “The key to achieving powerful teaching and learning in social studies is not technology itself, but rather how technology is used as a tool to encourage the doing of social studies in the pursuit of citizenship.”³ Skeptics may wonder if they should use instructional time to allow students to work online when students could obtain information through books or magazines. The Internet enables students to be actively involved by allowing them to navigate and explore topics more deeply. Many websites contain databases of information. Consequently, students doing research are forced to think critically about the data they want to obtain by building graphs with detailed information.⁴ Students are learning through the use of the computer, not from the computer.⁵

There are countless Internet sources available to a civics classroom. During my lesson planning, I found a website focused on tracking campaign contributions. Open Secrets, www.opensecrets.org, is sponsored by the Center for Responsive Politics. The nonprofit, nonpartisan D.C.-based organization aims to educate voters on the influence of money in politics and to engage citizens in creating a more responsive government.⁶ Based on my experiences in the classroom, the site can be used to emphasize several key points about money in our political system.

Using the Website in the Classroom

I was fortunate to have a wireless laptop cart which enabled each of my students to have their own computer with Internet access. Before I had laptop computers, I simply used lecture to convey the influence of money in American politics. However, with Internet access, I led my students through the Open Secrets website to highlight certain aspects of the money trail in our political system. I had a LCD projector, which enabled my students to follow along on their lap-

top computers. Once students had the opportunity to view particular links, I engaged them in student-centered discussion on various issues related to campaign finance.⁷ Since the high school I taught at was on the block schedule, with 80-minute classes, I was able to do this in one class period.

Federal Election Commission

By law, campaign contributions must be reported, and the Federal Election Commission (FEC) keeps track of these contributions. My lesson began by having my students learn more detailed information about the FEC by clicking on the “Basics” link. This segment explains the responsibilities assigned to the commission. The responsibilities include oversight of federal campaign finance law and its enforcement. In particular, the FEC is responsible for the oversight of campaign financing in presidential and congressional elections.⁸ Open Secrets also has a direct link to the FEC website, www.fec.gov.

Contribution Limits

Students often wonder how much money can be given to politicians. A scroll down menu appears from the “Basics” link, where students can click on “Campaign Finance Law.” Here, students can read about how much money can be contributed to a politician and how frequently contributions can be made. Currently,

individuals can give \$2,300 to an individual candidate, \$28,500 to a political party, and \$10,000 to a Political Action Committee (PAC), state political party, or a local political party during a two-year election cycle.⁹ Teachers can use this feature of the site to facilitate a discussion on contribution limits (e.g., should they, or should they not exist?). Some students may argue that contribution limits violate freedom of expression. Others may argue that contribution limits are needed to limit the influence of major corporations, who can afford to give significant contributions.

Campaign Contributions

Students may click on any member of Congress and view a link called “Source of Funds.” This feature divides campaign contributions into the following areas: individual, PAC, candidate self-financing, and other. PACs are political committees organized to raise funds and spend money for a candidate seeking office or to defeat a candidate. Most members of Congress are largely funded through individual and PAC contributions. Traditionally, PACs are formed by businesses, labor groups, and ideological interest groups. Students can track the campaign contributions through this link. For example, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) receives about 75 percent of his contributions from individual contributors. However, a few members of Congress finance their own campaigns with little financial assistance. Senator Herb Kohl (D-WI) finances about 95 percent of his own campaign.¹⁰ This information provided the opportunity to discuss a candidate’s motivation not to seek financial assistance from others. (One argument is that the candidate would not be beholden to individuals and groups that have financed his or her campaign.)

Committee Assignments

Each member of Congress is usually appointed to one or more committees. The website features a list of committee assignments for each politician in Congress. Committee assignments can

have an impact on the origin of contributions. I highlighted a number of members of Congress and facilitated a discussion based on this segment. For example, Congressman Ike Skelton (D-MO) serves on the Armed Services Committee. I would direct students to the “Top Contributors” link to determine where he was receiving a substantial amount of money. Lockheed Martin and Northrop Gunman, who have national defense contracts, gave substantial contributions to Skelton. My students then realized there was a connection between his committee work and the money trail. When we looked at donations for Congressman Sam Graves (R-MO), who was from a rural part of the same state and served on the Agriculture Committee, the students saw that the Dairy Farmers of America had given Graves a substantial contribution.¹¹ We were able to replicate this point repeatedly.

Comparing State Contributions

Following the discussion on committee assignments, I guided my students to contrast members of Congress from different states. For example, Senator Kit Bond (R-MO) received about \$9 million in contributions from 2001-2006. Meanwhile, records showed Senator Charles Schumer (D-NY) received about \$22 million during the same time period.¹² Students pondered this vast disparity and eventually realized that the population difference between the two states was significant. Additionally, campaign television commercials in New York City are much more expensive than media markets in Missouri.

Students also clicked on and viewed the “Top Contributors” section for various politicians. Here again, students observed how contributions varied depending on the lawmaker’s state. For instance, Senator Jim Talent (R-MO) received \$113,000 from Anheuser-Busch; the St. Louis-based brewing company. Senator Sam Brownback (R-KS) and Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS) received contributions from Sprint-Nextel, a company based in Kansas.¹³

Students enjoy seeing the origins of money for the politicians representing them in Washington; they may recognize many of the local businesses. In fact, some of their parents may work for the companies listed. Teachers may want to preview the website before using it in the classroom to see if any well-known companies in their community are listed. In which case, the teacher could decide how or if to proceed. However, all of the data on the website is public information.

Comparing Contributions for Democrats and Republicans

While there are some similarities in the origins of campaign contributions for both parties, there are significant differences. Traditionally, Democrats have been heavily financed by labor unions, and Republicans largely funded by major corporations. I gave my students the opportunity to contrast contribution sources by clicking again on the “Top Contributors” link of a lawmaker’s profile. For example, Congressman Dave Obey (D-WI) has significant campaign contributions from numerous labor unions including the American Federation of Teachers, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, and the United Auto Workers. The students should then view contributions for a Republican. For instance, Congressman Paul Ryan (R-WI) has significant contributions from several major corporations including General Electric, AT&T, and General Motors.¹⁴ This comparison provides a great opportunity to discuss these differences and to consider historical trends.

Presidential Candidates

As the current presidential election heats up, millions of dollars in contributions are flowing to support the candidates’ bid for office. It’s an opportune time for students to see how much additional money is being sent to the candidates. One great example is to contrast two politicians from the same state—one who is running for presi-

dent and one who is not. For example, Hillary Clinton (D-NY) received \$51 million in contributions from 2001-2006. During that same period, Charles Schumer (D-NY) received \$22 million. Barack Obama (D-IL) raised \$16 million from 2001-2006 compared to \$8 million for Dick Durbin (D-IL). Former presidential candidate Sam Brownback (R-KS) also received more contributions than his fellow Kansan in the Senate. From 2001-2006, Brownback received almost \$3.5 million compared to \$2 million contributed to Pat Roberts (R-KS).¹⁵ This comparison provides an opportunity for the class to discuss motivations for contributing to a candidate's presidential campaign (e.g., access to the candidate and possibly gaining support for a contributor's agenda).

Advantages of Being an Incumbent

The advantages held by incumbent candidates are common knowledge; however, the Open Secrets website provides students with concrete data to illustrate this fact. During the 2004 election, incumbents raised \$351 million compared with \$183 million for their challengers. I directed my students to examine the "Election Overview" link of the webpage to see actual differences in individual cases. Here, students can pick from a number of races in the 2004 election cycle. For example, Senator Charles Grassley (R-IA) outspent his opponent by a 9:1 ratio. Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) also outspent his opponent by a 9:1 ratio.¹⁶

When students are given the opportunity to view the data, they are able to see the far-reaching influence of money in our democracy. In particular, students note the inherent advantage an incumbent has in being able to reach more potential voters with his or her message because of a better-financed campaign. My students often wondered why incumbents had such a huge fundraising advantage. After lengthy discussion, students determined some key factors, including (1) name recognition

and (2) an incumbent's ability to point to accomplishments on behalf of his or her Congressional district or state.

Contributions from Your Community

I often find that students connect a great deal more to a subject matter when they can identify a local connection. On the Open Secrets site, a section allows viewers to type in their own zip code and see the top contributors from that community. Many students will recognize names of local businesses and possibly individuals in their community. This offers the opportunity to discuss why these individuals or businesses might be motivated to give a significant amount of money to a certain politician in Washington. A teacher concerned about the possible embarrassment of students who might know someone on the list, might want to send a permission letter home to parents informing them about the intended activity and website. If a parent objected, the teacher might choose not to carry out the activity. However, I carried out this activity on several occasions in my high school classroom without using permission forms, and I never experienced objections either from students or from parents.

Influencing Legislation in Washington

Events in Washington are constantly unfolding, and Open Secrets continuously monitors and updates its legislative information. The "News & Issues" link allows viewers to see legislation being debated in Congress. Most importantly, students can see the influence of money on these bills. For example, the site recently featured a segment about an energy bill dealing with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Viewers could see that interest groups in the energy sector contributed \$50 million compared with about \$2 million from environmental interest groups. About 75 percent of energy sector contributions went to Republicans. About 88 percent of environmental group contributions went to Democrats.¹⁷ This information

offers teachers an opportunity to discuss a couple of different issues. For instance, (1) Why do Democrats receive more money from environmental interest groups than Republicans? (2) Do you think politicians are swayed by contributions, or do they make decisions based on what's best for their constituents?

Lobbyists

Additional investigation enables students to see which companies and labor unions spend the most money on lobbyists. By clicking on the "Lobbying" link, students can view the top spenders on lobbyists in the country. Topping the list at a whopping \$317 million is the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Coming in second and third, respectively, are the American Medical Association (\$156 million) and General Electric (\$137 million).¹⁸ Most students will recognize the other companies in the top 10 list. Teachers can also have their students view the actual lobbying firms these companies have hired to represent them on Capitol Hill and how much money the companies have spent on each firm. Frequently, students will raise additional questions as they proceed to look at the data.

Travel

Students can click on the "Database" link to find information related to travel. Many students may be wondering why elected officials spend private money and taxpayer money to travel domestically and abroad. The feature allows viewers to see each trip taken by the various politicians. Please note that some of the trips may have been taken by a congressional staff member. Senator Saxby Chambliss's (R-GA) congressional staff had spent the most money on travel from 2005-2007 (\$108,000).¹⁹ His itinerary included a trip by a staff member to Taiwan to participate in a discussion on beef trade between the United States and Taiwan. This information offers the teacher an opportunity to discuss whether students feel it is justifiable to spend private money (i.e., corporation,


association, or interest group funds) or taxpayer's money on similar trips around the world.

Political Parties and Legislative Issues

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of this research is tracking who is supporting each party based on a particular issue. Open Secrets has a feature to help students track this. There is a link called "Who Gives," which has a scroll down feature. Click on "Industries," and there will be another scroll down feature with a large number of issues for students to pick from and explore. Issues range from abortion to gun control. For example, when viewing gun control, students can see a difference in funding to the two major parties from interest groups. The Democratic Party received substantially more money from gun control advocates than the Republican Party. In fact, Democrats received \$44,000 from gun control groups. In comparison, Republicans received about \$5,000. However, when students view the topic of gun rights they will see the exact opposite. In 2006, Republicans received \$913,000 from gun rights' groups compared to \$140,000 for Democratic politicians.²⁰

These are just a few of the unique features this site offers for use in the civics classroom. As the campaign season progresses, the website can be viewed periodically to continue to track the money trail. Other websites that provide significant information on campaign financing are listed in the accompanying side bar.

Using the Internet is one of a variety of approaches to teaching students about the influence of money in politics. I have also used simulations to enable students to apply what they learned from my lectures and from readings on this topic. My students participated in a United States Senate simulation where they proposed bills and served on committees. The simulation forced students to consider the various interest groups and constituents from the

state they were representing when they debated and voted on bills. From this, students got a sense of the difficult decisions politicians face when they have conflicting signals from interest groups and their constituents. Consequently, students were able to apply much of what they had learned from our campaign finance investigations online. 

Notes

1. Diana Oblinger and James Oblinger, *Educating the Net Generation* (Boulder, Colo.: Educause, 2005), www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/pub7101.pdf.
2. Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001), www.marc-prensky.com/writing/default.asp.
3. David Hicks, Peter Doolittle, and John Lee, "Information Technology, Constructivism, and Social Studies Teacher Education, ED 472 247 (2002): 1.
4. David Jonassen, Jane Howland, Rose Marra, and David Crismond, *Meaningful Learning with Technology* (Columbus, Ohio: Pearson, Merrill, Prentice Hall, 2008).
5. Ibid.
6. Center for Responsive Politics, "Open Secrets," www.opensecrets.org (2007).
7. Tina Heafner, "Social Studies and Technology: Teachers' Perceptions of Effective Integration," ED 472 247 (2002).
8. The Federal Election Commission, Mission and History, www.fec.gov/info/mssion.shtml.
9. Center for Responsive Politics, "Open Secrets," www.opensecrets.org (2007).
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

SCOTT SCHEUERELL is an assistant professor of education at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa. His primary research focus is the integration of educational technology in social studies. He can be reached at scott.scheuerell@loras.edu.

ADDITIONAL WEBSITES

The Federal Election Commission: www.fec.gov

Congress established the Federal Election Commission in 1975 to track money in our political system. The web page features an interactive map where students can track campaign contributions in their community. The interactive map also features outlines of congressional boundaries in each state.

Map Light: www.maplight.org/

Map Light is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization whose website highlights campaign contributions in an interactive way for students. Students can track particular bills and see how money may have played a role in whether the bill was passed by Congress. In fact, the site provides graphs which highlight whether campaign contributions increased to members of Congress right before they voted on the legislation.

The Campaign Finance Institute:

www.cfinst.org/

In the 2008 presidential election cycle, much has been said about "527s," the organizations designed to influence a political election.¹ This website provides a list of 527s and how much money they spent on Democratic or Republican causes. In addition, there is a link that highlights the top individual 527 donors.

National Institute on Money in State Politics: www.followthemoney.org/

This website, sponsored by the National Institute on Money in State Politics, provides a user-friendly database for high school students to investigate the money trail in statewide elections. For example, the site provides detailed campaign finance information on the following statewide offices: governor, lieutenant governor, attorney general, auditor, secretary of state, treasurer, and members of the state legislature.

Note

1. Center for Responsive Politics, "Open Secrets," www.opensecrets.org (2007).