Shining a Light on State Campaign Finance

An Evaluation of the Impact of the National Institute on Money in State Politics

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Preface

The National Institute on Money in State Politics (the Institute) is a 501(C)(3) organization that collects, processes, and makes public information on campaign contributions made to state-level candidates for public office. The Institute hired the RAND Corporation to probe user perspectives on the Institute and its data, on how the data are being used, and on how the utility of the data might be improved in the future. In short, we were asked to help the organization define and understand impact and to explore how the Institute's efforts over the last decade have been influential. Drawing on experiences of a variety of users, as well as a review of the publications that have used the Institute's data and research reports, this report provides an evaluation of the Institute's impact on the public discourse over campaign finance at the state level.

This research should be of interest to the Institute, its intended audiences and data users, and other nonprofit organizations that operationally and programmatically consider their own impact on the public and public discourse. In particular, organizations that provide data resources and analytic research may find the approach contained in this report particularly useful.

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The RAND Institute for Civil Justice (ICJ) is dedicated to improving the civil justice system by supplying policymakers and the public with rigorous and nonpartisan research. Its studies identify trends in litigation and inform policy choices concerning liability, compensation, regulation, risk management, and insurance. The institute builds on a long tradition of RAND Corporation research characterized by an interdisciplinary, empirical approach to public policy issues and rigorous standards of quality, objectivity, and independence.

ICJ research is supported by pooled grants from a range of sources, including corporations, trade and professional associations, individuals, government agencies, and private foundations. All its reports are subject to peer review and disseminated widely to policymakers, practitioners in law and business, other researchers, and the public.

The ICJ is part of RAND Justice, Infrastructure, and Environment, a division of the RAND Corporation dedicated to improving policy and decisionmaking in a wide range of policy domains, including civil and criminal justice, infrastructure protection and homeland security, transportation and energy policy, and environmental and natural resources policy.

Questions or comments about this report should be sent to the project leader, Geoffrey McGovern (Geoffrey_McGovern@rand.org). For more information on the Institute for Civil Justice, see http://www.rand.org/icj or contact the director (icjdirector@rand.org).

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Summary

The National Institute on Money in State Politics (the Institute) is a 501(c)(3) organization that collects, processes, and makes public information on campaign contributions made to state-level candidates for public office. The Institute disseminates its work through a website, FollowtheMoney.org, and provides access to an extensive database of state campaign contribution information, as well as a series of self-generated research reports dealing with topical issues such as industry contributions related to state referenda and ballot measures, and the role of money in state judicial elections.

In 2013, the Institute hired the RAND Corporation to probe user perspectives on the Institute and its data, on how the data are being used, and on how the utility of the data might be improved in the future. In short, we were asked to help the organization define and understand its impact and to explore how the Institute's efforts over the last decade have been influential. Drawing on experiences of a variety of users, as well as a review of the publications that have used the Institute's data and research reports, this report provides an evaluation of the Institute's impact on the public discourse over campaign finance at the state level.

Bringing State Campaign Finance Out of the Shadows

Political contributions are a basic part of political life in the United States. The funding of political action committees (PACs); Super-PACs; 501(c)(4) "social welfare" groups; national, state, and local party committees; and lobbyists supplements individual donations made to candidates, thereby supporting races for legislative and judicial positions across the country. But what role does all of this money play in the democratic process?

Answering this question in an informed way requires information on the identities of donors and political recipients—what might be termed campaign finance transparency. A push for disclosure is a necessary first step in beginning to answer the questions about the interactions between money and politics. A long line of cases in the United States has recognized that disclosure of political contributions is an essential part of campaign finance law. In a related vein, the courts have struck down limits on the amount of money that can be given in various contexts, making disclosure one of the strongest elements of current campaign finance regulation.

Organizations like the National Institute on Money in State Politics are positioned to be essential resources for information on donations, given the established legal framework for campaign finance disclosure in the United States. In principle, the Institute's data can help to encourage greater awareness, transparency, and accountability in the political system. The

Institute has been collecting political donation data from the 50 states for more than a decade. The goal of the Institute is to illuminate the shadows where money and politics intersect.

Impact Has Both Qualitative and Quantitative Dimensions

As a primary matter, this report discusses what framework might best be appropriate for assessing the Institute's impact and its role in shedding light on money in politics. *Impact* is a term with many different meanings when applied to program evaluations. For example, one might use a strictly quantitative approach to *impact* and identify ways to track the amount of research or the number of publications that are using the Institute's data—in essence, tying impact metrics to things that can most easily be counted. We summarize some evidence of this sort of impact, including the number of academic articles in law and political science disciplines that base their analyses on Institute data. For example, a recent search on the JSTOR database revealed about two dozen political science articles drawing on Institute data—most of which aim to tease out the role of the money pressure groups and lobbyists use to effect legislative change. Of further interest, most of these articles are from the last several years, following a period of significant expansion in the data the institute collects and aggregates—perhaps indicating that the Institute's database will increase in value, and be used more often in research, as its bank of data continues to grow larger.

Yet, in our view, impact is revealed not only in these sorts of metrics (i.e., numbers of web page hits or academic citations), but also in the role Institute data play in the context of the larger campaign finance enterprise. We focus on how various classes of end users are actually employing the data. We opt, then, for a more qualitative review of impact, one that looks to cases in which users have accomplished analysis or public policy goals that, both in our estimation and in terms of the users' own experience, would otherwise not have been possible without the Institute's data or research.

In our report, we draw a distinction between two different conceptions of impact that might be applied, one we call the "activist view," and the other we call the "ecological view." The difference lies in whether the program being evaluated (here, the Institute) is better seen as a direct influencer of policy or, instead, as an intermediate step in the production of new policy change or new ideas. Given the Institute's position as a key compiler of data and a producer of digests and reports on current campaign finance topics of interest—and not primarily as an advocate for campaign finance reform or other direct policy changes—we adopt the "ecological view" as our preferred approach for guiding an impact evaluation. This focuses the attention of the report on the uptake and use of Institute data and analyses by secondary and tertiary users. If the data are being used, and if the users are enabled to do more because of the Institute's data and analyses, we would be on our way to understanding how the Institute is having an effect on the broader community of users.

The Institute's Data Are Being Used in Informational and Advocacy Efforts

To understand how the Institute's data are being used, we reviewed scholarly work, journalistic publications, and reports from the advocacy communities that use Institute data to inform their analyses. Furthermore, we interviewed journalists, academics, and policy advocates to get subjective experiences about the Institute and its data, as well as suggestions for increasing usage of the data in the future. What we found was that Institute data users are working in a wide variety of policy and academic areas. From specific issues of public policy, such as prison reform, to sweeping data analysis of the strategic choices made by lobbyists, to public awareness raising campaigns about judicial elections, the Institute's data have been valuable to many different groups pursuing many different causes.

Journalists, from traditional media outlets with national reach to new media practitioners and the journalism schools, are aware of and are using the Institute to provide context and transparency to their political reporting. The Institute is seen as the go-to resource, a "gold standard" reference, and a "gold mine" of information. The Supreme Court's *McCutcheon v. FEC* decision also identified the Institute's website as one of the main resources for campaign finance information on state elections. The academic community has clearly identified the Institute's database as a resource for state politics and policy researchers. Their research is being published in top journals in political science and in law reviews. The advocacy communities, too, are using the Institute's data to uncover large donors and to raise awareness about financial relationships involving judicial, legislative, and gubernatorial candidates. Some advocacy groups that are not primarily focused on campaign finance transparency are nevertheless using the Institute's data to identify instances of influence peddling seemingly playing a role in state policy.

The fact that so many and so varied users find value in the data and transform the Institute's resource into new efforts and new ideas is a testament to both the importance of the data themselves and to the Institute's efforts and impact. We find that the Institute has made meaningful contributions to the public debate over the role of money in politics, both at the state level and nationally. The users we interviewed see the Institute as the gold standard resource for data on money in state politics. Indeed, the Institute has been a driving force behind informed public discussion of state campaign finance in the academic, journalistic, and advocacy communities. Perhaps as importantly, its users see it as the best available independent resource for individuals who seek to discover the roots of the campaign money that has financed their own state-level candidates.

Conclusions and Recommendations

With the recent trend in the jurisprudence of election law moving toward greater First Amendment protection of political contributions, the role of disclosure of campaign finance contributions is increasingly important for the window it provides into the ways money and

politics interact. The National Institute on Money in State Politics is the only free multistate resource that compiles campaign finance contributions to state-level campaigns.

In the meantime, the Institute is having an impact in several ways. It has been influential because it has created a resource for state campaign finance data. The Supreme Court and academic, journalistic, and advocacy users view these data to be of great value to democratic society. The data enable transparency that can potentially reveal phenomena like corruption or the capture of incumbents by special interests, thereby helping to promote greater accountability. The Institute's target audiences' use of the data also bears testament to their value. Academics, journalists, and advocates are regularly using the data to make contributions in their respective fields.

There are, however, opportunities for more strongly leveraging the Institute's impact. Given scarce resources, it is worthwhile for the Institute to strategically evaluate which of its audiences have the necessary awareness of the Institute, interest in campaign finance, and capability for extracting value from its database. Here, we recommend a focus on the journalistic community—with special focus on leveraging new media platforms and research products that can be shared in a networked communications environment. To a lesser extent, the Institute should work with journalism communities to develop new "big data" skills and should partner with university libraries and data centers to raise awareness of the database. Additionally, academic communities in economics, public health, and sociology may find benefit in learning about the data and partnering with the Institute to inform research in these academic disciplines.

Overall, the Institute is trying to shine a light into the dim world of political money. The illumination of political donations that the Institute's data provide enables new communities to see, to explore, and to report on the connections between money and politics at the state level.

Acknowledgments

This report would not have been possible without the contributions of several professionals at the National Institute on Money in State Politics; input from the academic, journalistic, and advocacy sectors; and support and assistance from our colleagues at RAND. We would especially like to thank the following: Edwin Bender, Denise Roth Barber, Barbara Bonifas, Beverly Magley, Ken Feaster, and Maria Kurtz, from the National Institute on Money in State Politics, as well as to the board of the Institute, which provided feedback on an earlier version of this report; Adam Skaggs, Mayors Against Illegal Guns (formerly of the Brennan Center for Justice); Bruce Freed, President of the Center for Political Accountability; Amy Pienta, University of Michigan, Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; Marc Cooper, University of Southern California, Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; Richard Hasen, University of California, Irvine; and Denise Malan, Investigative News Network and Investigative Reporters and Editors.

We also extend out thanks to the many other academics, journalists, and advocates who asked to remain anonymous but who shared valuable insights into their understanding and use of the Institute and its resources.

Sincere appreciation is due to Richard Briffault of Columbia Law School, who provided keen insight and comments on this report. Our RAND leadership and support teams were, as always, essential. Special thanks are shared with Paul Heaton, Debra Knopman, Jack Riley, Susan Gates, Olesya Tkacheva, members of the RAND Center for Corporate Ethics and Governance Board of Advisors, Robert Jackson, Pamela Calig, Di Valentine, Stephanie Lonsinger, Sarah Hauser, and Kate Giglio.

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1. The Problem is in the Data: Bringing State Campaign Finance Out of the Shadows

Campaign Finance in the Era of *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon*

Political contributions are a basic part of political life in the United States. The funding of political action committees (PACs); Super-PACs, 501(c)(4) "social welfare" groups; national, state, and local party committees; and lobbyists supplements individual donations made to campaigns, thereby supporting races for legislative and judicial positions across the country.

Despite the manifest trend toward ever-costlier elections, the role that money actually plays in politics is a hotly debated subject. Are campaign contributions best understood as an expression of support for a candidate's political views and as a proxy for expected voting behavior? Or do contributions instead involve covert attempts to gain access to government officials, to curry favor with them, and/or to influence public policy outcomes for private gain? As a systemic matter, does the mingling of money and politics have a corrosive effect on democracy?

A decade ago, the Supreme Court, as it upheld a set of controversial campaign finance reforms established under the McCain-Feingold law, voiced concern over "the actual corruption threatened by large financial contributions and the eroding of public confidence in the electoral process through the appearance of corruption."[1] Despite this concern, actual corruption cases involving the election process have notably been rare in recent decades.[2] Meanwhile, the need for public confidence in democratic institutions—certainly a core value in democratic governance—has not translated into policies that effectively stanch the flow of money to campaigns. Indeed, in the years since, the Supreme Court has shifted directions and has steered campaign finance law into a period of deregulation, effectively opening up pathways for corporate and union donations that were once barred, while eliminating federal caps on the aggregate amount of money that can be contributed in an election cycle.[3] In the most recent *McCutcheon* case, handed down in 2014, Chief Justice John Roberts opined: "Congress may not regulate contributions simply to reduce the amount of money in politics, or to restrict the political participation of some to enhance the relative influence of others."

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[1] *McConnell v FEC*, 540 U.S. 93, 2003. See also *Buckley v Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 1976.

[2] See Ann M. Ravel, "How Not to Enforce Campaign Laws," *New York Times,* April 2, 2014. There have been corruption cases: The cases of Representative William J. Jefferson and the Jack Abramoff affair readily come to mind. See "Investigating Jack Abramoff—Special Report," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2005, and Carl Hulse, "For Democrats, A Scandal of Their Own," *New York Times*, May 23, 2006.

[3] *Citizens United v FEC,* 558 U.S. 310, 2010; *McCutcheon et al. v FEC*, 2014.

Theories of corruption and undue influence are, of course, implicit in any federal policy that regulates political campaign contributions in an otherwise democratic context. A riptide of empirical and analytical questions is posed by any such restriction: Who is actually making campaign contributions? Who is receiving them? And what, if anything, do the donors obtain in return? Answering questions like these is fundamentally difficult, in part because of the complicated nature of political relationships and in part because of the relative unavailability of good data to inform the analysis of these relationships. Consequently, as the debate over money in politics grows louder, so too do the voices expressing interest in tracking the sources, amounts, and identities of donors and recipients of political money. Calls for greater transparency—and for more readily accessible and useful data—are now a regular part of the campaign finance debate. Justice Anthony Kennedy, in the course of the *Citizens United* opinion, notably rejected a request to strike disclosure laws and remarked:

> The First Amendment protects political speech; and disclosure permits citizens and shareholders to react to the speech of corporate entities in a proper way. This transparency enables the electorate to make informed decisions and give proper weight to different speakers and messages.[4]

Apart from drawing any conclusion about the desirability or corrosiveness of money in political life, the push for *greater transparency* holds some promise to help unravel the effects of the money. A perennial favorite of transparency supporters, Louis Brandeis, once wrote, "Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants."[5] Motivated by this argument, a small ecosystem of nonprofit organizations has grown over the past 30 years that has the self-imposed mission of shedding light on the role of money in politics. Some of these organizations start from the assumption that a corrupting influence is at work. These groups assiduously work to expose what they view as cabals of moneyed interests, hidden in the houses of power. Other groups take a more detached view of the problem, simply seeking to make data about political spending and finance more available to the public. Perhaps most prominent among the latter, on matters of state campaign finance, is the National Institute on Money in State Politics (NIMSP, or the Institute).

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[4] Kennedy, Anthony, *Supreme Court of the United States, Syllabus, Citizens United v Federal Election Commission*, 2010, p. 55.

[5] Brandeis wrote this quote in the context of a 1913 commentary on the banking industry, the role of industrial trusts in competition, and the importance of "sunlight" in helping to prevent corruption. See Louis D. Brandeis, "Other People's Money," *Harper's Weekly*, November 29, 1913.

Following the Money: An Introduction to the National Institute on Money in State Politics

The Institute is a 501(c)(3) organization that collects, processes, and makes public information on campaign contributions made to state-level candidates for public office.[6] The Institute disseminates its work through a website, FollowTheMoney.org, and provides access to an extensive database of state campaign contribution information, as well as a series of self-generated research reports dealing with topical issues, such as industry contributions related to state referenda and ballot measures and the role of money in state judicial elections.[7] In its own words, the Institute "is the only nonpartisan, nonprofit organization revealing the influence of campaign money on state-level elections and public policy in all 50 states."[8] The Institute broadly seeks to make state-level campaign finance data as accessible and useful as possible, while promoting independent use of the data by the public. More specifically, the Institute encourages "investigation … of state-level campaign contributions by journalists, academic researchers, public-interest groups, government agencies, policymakers, students and the public at large."[9]

In 2013, the Institute hired RAND to conduct an evaluation of the impact of the Institute's data, research, and outreach activities. As described in Section 2, RAND previously conducted a study on the Institute's data gathering, informatics, and security procedures (the "2003 RAND evaluation"). That previous study was undertaken at a time when the Institute was expanding its data collection and aggregation activities and initiating a push to collect campaign finance data on all 50 states. Now, more than a decade later, the Institute asked RAND to evaluate the success of its efforts. Ultimately, the Institute posed two basic questions to RAND: (1) What are some reasonable ways of understanding and operationalizing "impact," in connection with an organization like the Institute? (2) What kinds of insight can be gleaned from the Institute's stakeholders and data users, to the end of improving the Institute's products and its impact?

In Section 2 of this report, we provide an introduction to the Institute for audiences that may be unfamiliar with its work and its history, and we touch on some different possible metrics for defining "impact" in this context. Section 3 summarizes our findings on the impact of the Institute's data, based on interviews and illustrative case studies of key outside groups that have, or have not, made use of that data. In Section 3, we also describe another dimension of the Institute's impact, through its role in supporting an ecosystem of downstream campaign finance advocacy organizations. In Section 4, we conclude with a summation of our findings and offer

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[6] For federal elections data, two leading sources are the websites of the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and the Center for Responsive Politics.

[7] See Peter Quist and Nadeanne Haftl, "2009–2010 Ballot Measure Overview," NIMSP website, April 12, 2012, and Linda Casey, "Money in Judicial Elections, 2009–2010," NIMSP website, April 6, 2012.

[8] See the Mission statement on the Institute website.

[9] See the Mission statement on the Institute website.

some suggestions for leverage points that the Institute might consider in seeking to expand its influence and improve on its performance in the future.

2. Summarizing the History, Function, and Value Proposition of the National Institute on Money in State Politics

About the Institute

NIMSP began in 1991 as an effort called the Money in Western Politics Project, under the auspices of the Western States Center, financed by a grant from the MacArthur Foundation's Democracy Program (the "MacArthur Project"). At that time, the MacArthur Project granted five regional teams the resources to begin digitizing state campaign finance data.[10] Before the MacArthur Project, no concerted effort to compile state-level data had been successful. Any individual or researcher who was interested in studying the flow of political money at the state level would have had to contact each states' election official, to obtain copies of the relevant [hardcopy] disclosure forms. As a practical matter, the distributed and analog nature of state campaign finance records prior to 1991 virtually prohibited large-scale comparative analyses of political contributions to state elections.

As in other domains in which "big data" aggregation efforts have emerged, there was a clear need for more-accessible information on the amount, sources, and recipients of money in politics. Nationally, the roots of efforts to digitize and disseminate campaign finance data actually predate the MacArthur Project by at least two decades. The first consolidated effort toward disclosing and disseminating federal campaign contribution data was the work of the FEC. The FEC, a federally funded, independent regulatory agency, not only has enforcement authority under the Federal Election Campaign Act but also, since 1975, has been charged with compiling Presidential and congressional candidate campaign finance data.

With the FEC data repository as a model, the MacArthur Project sought to create a state-level equivalent. In 1999, three of the regional teams merged to form what is now known as the National Institute on Money in State Politics, led by the efforts of Edwin Bender, who was the manager of research for the original Money in Western Politics Project. With the western team at the helm, the Institute, based in Helena, Montana, undertook the effort to continue collecting and curating the data on a 50-state basis.

Motivated by the belief that data can inform public policy, the Institute seeks out campaign finance records from each of the 50 states, standardizes and aggregates the data, and releases them to the public in a variety of formats. The Institute recognizes the need for data on both aggregate levels of campaign contributions and the identities of donors and recipients, and works to meet this need with a longitudinal data set that tracks contributions over time. Much as the

[10] For additional background, see Maura R. O'Connor, "National Institute on Money in State Politics: Tracking Political Donations and Their Influence in All Fifty States," *Columbia Journalism Review*, April 3, 2012.

FEC creates a data repository for campaign contributions made to federal office holders and candidates, the goal of the Institute is to serve as the definitive data resource on all matters concerning campaign finance across the states.

Unlike the FEC, however, the Institute has neither government funding nor enforcement responsibilities relative to state campaign finance laws. The lack of government funding and the Institute's 501(c)(3) status make the organization reliant on philanthropic contributions. The 2013 annual budget for the Institute was $1.6 million.[11] The Institute's operations, run by a staff of 26, are financed mainly through foundation generosity. Major foundation support in 2013 came from the Bauman Foundation, the California Endowment, the Energy Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Hewlett Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, the Mertz Gilmore Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Rockefeller Family Fund, and the Sunlight Foundation. According to its website, "The Institute does not receive financial support from government, corporations or corporate foundations; and we do not accept contributions from political parties or candidate committees."[12] On a very limited basis, however, the Institute raises additional funds through database sales and custom research.[13]

The ultimate source for most of the data the Institute compiles is state election officials. In 2003, RAND conducted a process evaluation to assess the Institute's data gathering, processing, and security practices. That assessment looked in detail at the Institute's processes for acquiring both paper and electronic records from the state election offices, for inputting and aggregating the data, and for auditing the data. In the years since, many of the states have moved from paper to electronic record keeping. Regardless, the single most consistent attribute of the Institute's work is the considerable effort that it expends to compile and code campaign finance data across 50 states for standardized use.

More-recent efforts have been devoted to collecting new types of data (including data on independent expenditures, lobbyist expenditures, and PACs, as well as smaller scale projects on state trial courts, limited projects on local elections and ballot measures, and federal data).

The Institute Makes the Data Available in Useful and Varied Ways on Its Website

Moreover, the Institute has endeavored over time to make its data more useful and accessible to the public. The Institute disseminates its data in a variety of formats and equips visitors to its website with a variety of tools for visualizing and contextualizing data. On the Institute's current website, these features include

[11] See NIMSP, "2013 Annual Report: Constructing a New Paradigm," September 2013.

[12] NIMSP, "Where Do We Get Our Money?" web page, undated.

[13] See NIMSP IRS Form 990 for FY2011, available from NIMSP, "For the Record," web page, 2012.

- **My District** allows users to input location information, such as addresses and zip codes, and retrieve reports on the candidates from that area, total contributions received, contributors names and occupations, ballot measures, top contributor lists, and the like.
- **Point of Influence** helps users determine whether state legislators get contributions from within their own district borders or from external supporters.
- **National Overview** allows users to compare state trends to national trends in political giving.
- **Industry Influence** allows users to look at 130 industry sectors and to evaluate giving patterns within and across states.
- The **Legislative Committee Action Tool (L-CAT)** attempts to link campaign contributions with legislative outcomes.
- Other tools and devices that recombine and analytically "slice" the data in various ways.

To provide an example of a very basic search, a "My District" search request for information affiliated with zip code 15232 (Pittsburgh, PA) produced the types of information reproduced in Table 2.1.

From this top-level list of major donors, a user of the Institute's website can drill deeper into the data to discover the recipients of campaign contributions and can sift and sort these

Table 2.1. "My District" Top Contributors from 15232 (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania)

	Total		
Contributor	**$**	**%**	**Sector**
Pennsylvania State Education Association	58,000	4.04	Labor
Western Pennsylvania Laborers	51,050	3.56	Labor
Operating Engineers Local 66	34,600	2.41	Labor
Greater Pennsylvania Regional Council of Carpenters	31,200	2.18	Labor
International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers	29,250	2.04	Labor
Steamfitters Local 449	29,200	2.04	Labor
Transportation Construction Industries	24,500	1.71	Construction
AFSCME Council 13	23,450	1.64	Labor
Friends of Andy Dinniman	20,000	1.39	Candidate contribution
Jewish Community PAC of Pittsburgh	17,500	1.22	Ideology or single issue
Simmons, Richard P.	17,500	1.22	General business
Pennsylvania Service Employees	17,000	1.19	Labor
Electrical Workers Local 5	16,063	1.12	Labor
Committee to Elect Tim Solobay	15,000	1.05	Candidate contrib.
Pennsylvania Orthopaedic Society	15,000	1.05	Health
Plumbers Local 27	14,300	1.00	Labor
Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce	14,000	0.98	General business
Pennsylvania Bankers Association	12,500	0.87	Finance, insurance, and real estate
Buchanan Ingersoll & Rooney	12,200	0.85	Lawyers and lobbyists

NOTE: Results are from a query run in April 2014 at FollowTheMoney.org.

contributions according to such variables as political affiliation, incumbency, and election status (win or loss).[14]

More broadly, this search example illustrates something deeper about the functionality of the Institute. The Institute's website supports user-based queries for a range of different types of searches and analytic slices drawing on state campaign finance data. The Institute can thus be understood both as the compiler and aggregator of the data and as a portal designer and operator, in making that data accessible to outside users.

There are some limits to the Institute's data. These limits are mainly defined by the degree to which each state's regulatory system requires campaign donation disclosures. Since each state's regulatory system has a different set of disclosure requirements, cross-state variation will limit the amount, quality, and degree of transparency into the states' elections. Hence, the Institute is limited to the extent that the states are limited or inconsistent in the amount of information that must be disclosed. Likewise, if states fail to enforce their own laws to ensure compliance with disclosure rules, the Institute is likewise limited in the information it can collect and distribute.[15]

A Word on the Value of the Institute's Data

The Institute's work can be understood to comprise two different dimensions: adding *value* and creating or inspiring *impact*. Value is a qualitative dimension that reflects the importance and meaningfulness of the data itself. Impact, on the other hand, is more of a measurement concept—one that seeks to gauge the use of the data and degree of societal change produced by the use of the data (or, alternatively, the extent to which unwise or undesirable outcomes were avoided).

In considering the value of Institute data, it is impossible to ignore the underlying relevance of a database of political campaign contributions to an open and democratic society. The Institute's Executive Director has put it thus:

> What good data enables—data like that developed each cycle by the Institute—are different ways of correlating campaign-donor relationships with lawmakers and policy outcomes that benefit donors. But perhaps more important, quality data gives public officials, policy experts, and the public reliable information that

[14] We note that, as of this writing, a refresh of the Institute's website is currently under way and that the anticipated new website design will be equipped with major new functionality for public users. In the course of the current study, RAND was given beta testing access to the new Institute website and database tools. In addition to the new design, the increased functionality allows much more sophisticated analyses to be conducted on the website, while still remaining accessible for the individuals who wish to get top-level information about a district or a candidate.

[15] These limitations—caused by the states' willingness to require disclosure and to enforce existing disclosure laws—present a fundamental barrier to the types of analyses and research that can be done using Institute data. Variation in how states record and disclose data can also make use of Institute data more difficult (although Institute staff are available for consultation and assistance).

> can help them explore larger systemic policy options that can de-emphasize the role of money in our elections and emphasize voter involvement.[16]

Our own analysis of the Institute's operations—and the experiences of the interviewees (summarized in the following section)—gives support to this value-adding effort. Similar arguments concerning the value of this sort of data, when the data are made freely available to the public, can furthermore be found in the writings of Brandeis; the past opinions of the Supreme Court; and in the public campaigns toward greater electoral transparency, as evinced by the creation and operations of the FEC, as discussed in Section 1 and earlier in this section.

The potential and actual ability to contribute to an informed electorate, an empowered free press, and an honest and impartial set of elected officials might constitute what we call the *instrumental value* of the data. Further bolstering our impression that the data the Institute is collecting are of high value to society can be found in the legal regimes that regulate money in politics. Campaign and election law echoes this instrumental value of transparency. Though this trend began with *Buckley v Valeo* (1976), both the *Citizens United v FEC* (2010) and *McCutcheon et al. v FEC* (2014) decisions have spotlighted arguments for interpreting campaign finance transparency as an important element of democratic oversight.[17] The most explicit and recent argument along these lines comes from the majority opinion of the Supreme Court in the 2014 *McCutcheon* case. "[D]isclosure of contributions minimizes the potential for abuse of the campaign finance system," according to Chief Justice Roberts' *McCutcheon* opinion. Moreover,

> [w]ith modern technology, disclosure now offers a particularly effective means of arming the voting public with information. … Reports and databases are available on the FEC's website almost immediately after they are filed, supplemented by private entities such as OpenSecrets.org and FollowTheMoney.org.

Of course, FollowTheMoney.org is the web address of the Institute itself. In a related vein and in support of Chief Justice Roberts's conclusion about the importance and relevance of disclosure, the Institute's data have notably appeared in a range of other Supreme Court cases, most often brought forward in friend-of-the-court briefs by amici curiae.[18]

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[16] Edwin Bender, "Evidencing a Republican Form of Government: The Influence of Campaign Money on State-Level Elections." *Montana Law Review*, Vol. 74, No. 1, May 13, 2013, pp. 166–182.

[17] Our central point here is not that the courts have used the Institute's data. That, as we describe below, is important evidence regarding the impact of the Institute on decisionmakers. Rather, the treatment of the disclosure resources marshaled by the Institute helps demonstrate that these data are inherently valuable to the democratic process in and of themselves, apart from their application to any particular policy debate, election cycle, or campaign context. The data provide an important record of political reality, regardless of their ability to expose instances of undue influence or corruption.

[18] See Brennan Center for Justice, Brief on *Caperton v A.T. Massey Coal, Co, Inc.,* 2209 WL 45972, January 5, 2009; *FEC v Wisconsin Right to Life, Inc*., 551 U.S. 449, 2007 (dissent of Justice Souter); and Sunlight Foundation, the NIMSP, and the Center for Responsive Politics, Brief on *Citizens United v FEC*, 2009 WL 2365228, July 31, 2009.

If the Institute had spent the last decade compiling data that did not have the potential to unlock new insight, understanding, and clarity about the sources, recipients, and role of money in politics, there would be little justification for looking at the impact of the organization on general interest in, usage of, and knowledge gleaned from a 50-state database of money in state politics. To the contrary, the type of information the Institute is gathering seems quite valuable; indeed, the users of the data express a high level of interest in the data and analyses the Institute produces. So, as a starting point, the value in the data reflects a demand in the public arena.

Closely related to the importance of the information itself, the Institute's efforts to collect, curate, and disseminate the data resource are, we believe, themselves a noteworthy accomplishment and, in some sense, "impactful"—in the sense that the Institute's actions have added value to the raw data and made them more attractive to secondary and tertiary users. By collecting and distributing 50 states' data, the Institute has helped to transform the data into a new format in which the value is more likely to be enjoyed by society. In a similar vein, another instrumental function of the Institute involves making its database freely and easily available to the public. This, it must be said, is no small feat: The costs of compiling, editing, standardizing, uploading, programming, and constantly updating the database are substantial. It is again beyond the scope of the current report to benchmark how efficiently the Institute is performing any of these functions.

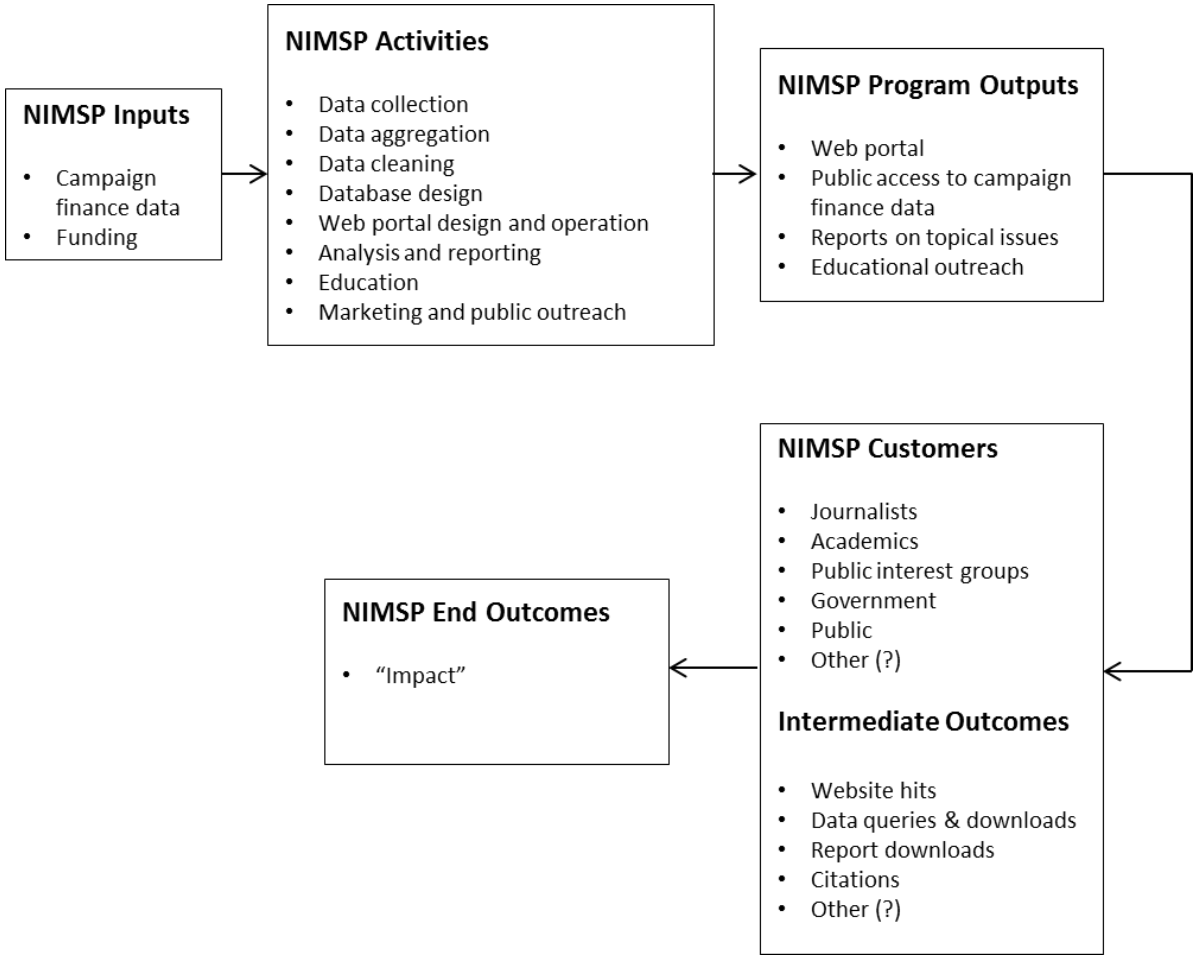
Describing the Formal Logic of the Institute: From Data to Users

For purposes of any kind of program evaluation, it can often be helpful to summarize the function of an organization through a formal "logic model." A logic model is a simplified, stylistic representation of the basic flow of operations in an organization. Such models usually involve schematics that trace the pathway of inputs, operations, outputs, intended end users, and (ultimate) outcomes. As such, a logic model can help clarify relevant goals and performance measures and, in turn, support strategic planning and evaluation activities.[19] Figure 2.1 shows the flow of program inputs to end outcomes.

Figure 2.1 offers a basic visual aid for understanding what the Institute does, what it produces, and for whom. In a few sentences, the Institute draws on campaign finance data from the states and undertakes many activities connected with collecting, cleaning, and aggregating data. The Institute also operates a website to make its data widely and freely available to users; engages in related marketing, outreach, and education efforts; and publishes some of its own self-authored analyses, drawing on the data. The Institute's "customers" include a variety of stakeholders that seek access to campaign finance data, with journalists, academics, and public interest groups being some of the most obvious users. A corresponding set of "intermediate

[19] See, for example, Victoria Greenfield, Valerie L. Williams, and Elisa Eiseman, *Using Logic Models for Strategic Evaluation: Application to the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TR-370-NCIPC, 2006.

Figure 2.1. Partial Logic Model for NIMSP



outcomes" stem from the customers, in the form of direct customer queries, downloads, and other attempts to access data and materials through the Institute website.

Figure 2.1 also helps to ground and pinpoint the focus of the current project. Initially, the Institute approached RAND for help in assessing the policy impact of its own activity. After further discussion, it became apparent that the Institute was already involved in significant self-assessment and measurement and that its request for help went beyond simply summarizing relevant intermediate performance measures (e.g., web traffic, or newspaper citations to the Institute's data). For example, the Institute tracks users through a function called MyFollowTheMoney. In April 2014, data that the Institute shared with RAND showed that 9,594 users had signed up for this function—of whom 3,994 were media users, with the remainder representing advocacy, academic, development professionals, and the like. This represents about a 1,500-user increase over the previous year. Other simple metrics available to the Institute

include the number of Twitter followers (7,374 as of April 2014), Facebook users (2,730), and media mentions (297 for the 12 months ending April 30, 2014).

Tracking the Use of Institute Data Is a Necessary but Limited Avenue for Understanding Its Impact

An organization like the Institute might first turn to counts of citations and unique users of the website and the data it furnishes as a way to gauge the use of its research and database. At first blush, evaluators might turn to several of these off-the-shelf approaches to provide traceable metrics related to impact. As an example of these approaches, consider metrics that track web page traffic, Google Scholar citations, or a sum of the number of academic and journalistic articles that cite the Institute over time and in various contexts.

The Institute can access each of these basic trackers with relatively little effort. Indeed, the Institute actively monitors many of these sorts of metrics as part of its own ongoing, internal performance assessment.[20] There are, for instance, a Google Scholar search for "National Institute on Money in State Politics" yielded 452 results; interestingly, the majority of these had publication dates post-2010.[21] A more-limited search of social science publications on the academic journal database JSTOR revealed about two dozen scholarly articles, mostly in the field of political science, that cite the Institute or use its data as part of their quantitative analyses (this, of course, undercounts works in progress, works presented to professional conferences, works that were not selected for publication, works so recent that they are embargoed from online access, and work published in outlets that do not have a distribution relationship with JSTOR[22]). Legal academia, as reflected in law review publications compiled by LexisNexis, reveals a deeper penetration, with 91 articles citing the Institute. (Most of these citations are more recent, perhaps demonstrating the increasing value of the database as its records grow over time but also perhaps reflecting growing interest in the role of campaign contributions in judicial elections. The latter is a topic in which the Institute has taken a prominent interest since it expanded into collecting data on judicial elections a few years ago).

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[20] As part of our evaluation, we were given sample metrics and online tracking data that the Institute actively monitors. Citations by blogs, new media outlets, and traditional media are compiled by the Institute on a monthly basis, as are numbers of visitors to and unique hits on FollowTheMoney.org and whether the visitors to the site are accessing it from traditional or mobile devices. In general, the Institute interprets its own data on these sorts of metrics as initial evidence suggesting that it has a significant and dynamic user base and that it has made significant strides in expanding its user base over the past decade.

[21] Most recent search run on April 20, 2014. As a point of comparison, a search for "OpenSecrets" yielded 3,790 results; and "Center for Responsive Politics" produced 4,050 results.

[22] Two notable omissions, *Judicature* and the *Justice System Journal*, have published several articles citing the Institute in the subject area of judicial elections.

Likewise, the Institute regularly tracks use of its data and reports by the journalistic community. In a 2013 *Montana Law Review* article, Institute Executive Director Edwin Bender noted that

> [national] news outlets, including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, T*he Wall Street Journal*, *Bloomberg BusinessWeek News*, *U.S. News & World Report*, NBC News, CBS News, National Public Radio, *USA Today*, and the *Los Angeles Times*, routinely cite the Institute and its data in national and state election stories.[23]

We can confirm that this bears out in our own independent investigation. A search of *The New York Times* confirms 22 articles that cite the Institute; 26 in *The Washington Post*; eight in *The Wall Street Journal* during the last four years. As with the academic literature, counting the number of journalistic citations will undercount the degree to which Institute reports and data have been used. Journalists are using the Institute for information, context, and background that do not show up in their copy but is nonetheless essential to the content-generating process.

Tracking the number of citations and web page hits pertaining to the Institute does reveal some information of primary interest. It does tell us something about who is using the data and how often. But without more context, these numbers may be difficult to interpret in ways that are useful for programmatic purposes. It is not obvious, for example, that every newspaper or academic citation is equally important, that every court case or amicus brief reference is equally impactful, or that various measures of traffic on the Institute's website correspond closely to its mission of contributing to political transparency and public discourse. These sorts of intermediate outcome metrics (per Figure 2.1) lend themselves to quantifying some aspects of the Institute's contacts with its users. But absent more, they do not directly address the Institute's larger social impact. Additionally, it bears mentioning that such metrics as trackers of citation counts will underreport the users of the data who do not formally credit the Institute as the data source.

Moving beyond these tracking metrics is the topic of this report. The Institute posed two basic questions to RAND: (1) What are some reasonable ways of understanding and operationalizing "impact," in connection with an organization like the Institute? (2) What kinds of insight can be gleaned from the Institute's stakeholders and data users, to the end of improving the Institute's products and its impact? These questions notably involve focusing on the bottom half of Figure 2.1 and seeking to fill in and elaborate on the final box in the diagram ("impact").

Summary

It is worth turning for a moment to the Institute's mission:

[23] Bender, 2013.

> The nonpartisan, nonprofit National Institute on Money in State Politics promotes an accountable democracy by compiling comprehensive campaign-donor, lobbyist, and other information from government disclosure agencies nationwide and making it freely available at FollowTheMoney.org.

By building a unique data resource on state campaign finance, the Institute ultimately seeks to serve as *lux lucet in tenebris*—"a light shining in darkness." Put another way, the aim of the Institute has never been solely to be a data archive but rather "to encourage transparency and promote independent investigation" and "to inform public debate on state policy issues."[24] By extension and with regard to state campaign finance, the Institute seeks to be a catalyst for greater integrity in the democratic process by providing more and better information on election funding to journalists, academics, voters, and other stakeholder groups. By collecting and facilitating access to state campaign finance information, the Institute aims to make that information more useful and, ultimately, to encourage others in sustained examination of the role and effect of money in politics. The degree to which these aims are being fulfilled and the prospects for enhancing the impact of the Institute in the future are the focus of Sections 3 and 4 of this report.

[24] See NIMSP, "Mission," undated.

3. An Ecological View of Impact Reveals the Role of the Institute in Supporting Informed Analysis of Money in State Politics

Introduction

The Institute's contract with RAND provided an opportunity to consider how its data resource is being used to influence public policy. The question of "impact" for an organization like the Institute poses something of a quandary because the Institute's mission does not primarily seek to influence policy in any particular direction, other than toward openness. Instead, the Institute primarily has an informational role. Again quoting from the Institute's website: "We encourage transparency and promote independent investigation of state-level campaign contributions by journalists, academic researchers, public-interest groups, government agencies, policymakers, students and the public at large." While a few Institute initiatives directly encourage greater transparency (such as the state-by-state scorecards that grade state campaign finance laws for their levels of required disclosures),[25] most of the Institute's activities are geared toward maintaining and curating its data resource for the use of others.

How, then, ought the Institute understand its own "impact" as a data resource? Evaluating the efforts to provide (rather than advocate for) transparency in the area of state-level campaign finance presents a challenging task because, as a first matter, definitions of impact, effectiveness, and even importance are nonstandardized. There is no single, objective standard for judging influence or effectiveness in this context—and our discussions with Institute staff were noteworthy in that the staff had a range of different opinions regarding what the Institute's chief impact is and how best to improve on it.[26]

What follows, then, is a brief discussion of our thinking about an appropriate conception of impact for an organization like the Institute. Our perspective, which we call the "ecological view," takes an indirect view of impact: one that is transmitted through a series of intermediaries who influence public policy and public discourse more directly. Having described this emphasis on the ecological perspective, we then draw on a series of interviews with key stakeholders and users of the Institute's data—those who are filling the role of the intermediaries in our ecological model.

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[25] See NIMSP, "Scorecard: Essential Disclosure Requirements for Independent Spending, 2013," May 16, 2013.

[26] For example, some staff we spoke with suggested that the Institute's impact closely corresponds with its data repository function. Consequently, they suggested improving impact by expanding the data that the Institute collects, by improving the quality and cleaning of that data, or by improving the web-based tool kit for allowing outside users to manipulate the data. Other staff suggested that impact could be better improved by expanding the user base, by documenting more uses of Institute data among key constituencies, or by having the Institute expand on its own investigative reports that dig into the data. These are all different, but plausible, perspectives on what impact means, coming from people most familiar with the Institute's mission.

Two Possible Views of Impact: The Activist View and the Ecological View

Because there is no standard definition of impact that we believe suffices to provide an accurate platform for evaluation of the Institute, we outline two competing possibilities to demonstrate why an ecologically derived view of impact seems the most appropriate for this project. To begin, we start with a simple, cause-and-effect understanding of impact, which we call the "activist view" of impact. In this model, impact would be understood as the direct result of the actions of the program under evaluation. Figure 3.1 depicts a simple chain of events that links the data, the Institute's activities, and the effect of the activities (which we identify as policy change or new ideas).

The key takeaways of this view of impact are that the Institute's activities are the proximate, immediate cause of the policy change or new ideas and that, by looking across time, we ought to see evidence of a change in the world that can only be attributed to the activities of the Institute itself.

While analytically parsimonious, the activist view of impact is inapt for evaluating the Institute's activities for several reasons. First, it fails to reflect the mission of the Institute. Recall from Section 2 that the mission of the Institute is as follows:

> The nonpartisan, nonprofit National Institute on Money in State Politics promotes an accountable democracy by compiling comprehensive campaign-donor, lobbyist, and other information from government disclosure agencies nationwide and making it freely available at FollowTheMoney.org.

Rather than directly lobbying for campaign finance reform or undertaking major social science studies of the correlations between contributions and politically relevant outcomes, the Institute is a compiler and distributor of information. This suggests a different tack would be needed if we wanted to understand how the Institute really affects the policy space.

Figure 3.1. A Simple Graphic of the Activist View of Impact

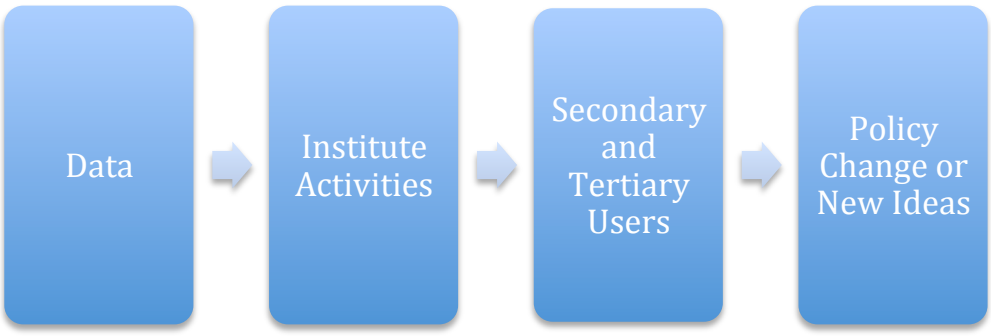
Counterfactually, were the Institute more like an advocacy group that pursued an agenda in a specific public policy area (for example, like the Sierra Club or the National Rifle Association), we could more conventionally assess the degree to which lobbying and public awareness raising efforts were having the desired effect. And the Institute could, if it so desired, take a more activist role in pushing states toward the direction of ever-greater transparency in a host of areas (local and municipal races, independent expenditures, etc.). But where, as here, the organization's primary activity is to collect and publish information, the notion of "impact" takes on a much more abstract complexion than the activist view captures.

Instead, we offer a minor revision to the activist model, minor because we add an intermediary stage between the Institute's activities and the policy or knowledge outcomes. This seemingly slight change, however, has important consequences for where we look to witness impact. Figure 3.2 introduces the role of intermediary data users.

Once these intermediary users are included in the model, we get a new set of relationships that need to be considered as part of our study of impact. We call this model the "Ecological View," drawing on the idea that ecology is the study of organisms in relation to one another (and to their surroundings). The key area of focus, then, is on the way the intermediary users are taking the Institute's data and research, blending it into the intermediaries' operations, then understanding how the Institute has added value to the intermediaries' own activities (which may or may not affect public policy or produce new ideas).

Using this ecological lens to guide our understanding of impact, our methodology requires us to identify users of the Institute's data and research, investigate how those organizations are using the information, and explore ways that the Institute can better meet the needs of their intermediary customers.

Figure 3.2. A Simple Graphic of the Ecological View of Impact



A Review of the Institute's Key Audiences

To narrow the focus, we honed in on several categories of users that the Institute identified as its target audience: academics; journalists; policy advocates; and, to an extent, the public. In the context of these groups, we set out to explore how and why the Institute's data are useful to those who actually use it. Recall that a key aspect of our understanding of impact is the instrumental value of the data to those who find use in understanding and contextualizing campaign finance data. We also sought to gain insight into what it might take to significantly enhance the uptake of Institute data in the academic, journalistic, and policy advocacy sectors. While we report here on some of these aspects (as they relate to impact), we provide more detailed recommendations in Section 5.

Some preliminary comments are due regarding our process for identifying and selecting candidates for interviews. By design, we focused only on users of the Institute's data and reports. Given the biases in media and academic circles toward federal issues, state politics has a narrower set of followers, and thus we relied not on a random selection of journalists and academics but on those that are using the Institute's research and data. Moreover, given time and resource constraints, we identified and interviewed a relatively small group of journalists, academics, and advocacy and public awareness groups. We reached out to more than two dozen media professionals, a dozen scholars, and a half-dozen organizations, following up with semistructured interviews with respondents from about half of each groups.[27]

We next turn to a review of the key audiences that the Institute is reaching, to better understand how the Institute's data and research are being used and, thereby, having an impact.

The General Public

We were not asked to survey the general public for its knowledge of the Institute or its activities. Our reasonable expectation is that the level of penetration of the Institute's data in this broad general realm is minimal. Nonetheless, when we visited the Institute and discussed the retail distribution of the data to the general public, the staff felt pressured to have an active and perhaps even growing retail focus on reaching the public audience. Much of this pressure came from the foundation community, we were told. And so, since one could reasonably think of impact in terms of ramping up general public knowledge about the Institute and campaign finance issues, generally, we begin by arguing against this benchmark—and indeed caution against this potential priority for the Institute.

As we think about the general public as a potential user of the Institute's data, we suspect that the actual impact and potential for impact with this audience is rather low. Overcoming these low

[27] Unless we were granted express permission to attribute comments to the respondents, we have kept identities of the interviewees and their respective organizations confidential.

levels would require a massive public awareness campaign. We doubt that current funding levels at the Institute would be able to do this effectively.

This situation—low awareness of disclosed campaign finance contributions—if correct, is actually of some consequence beyond just the Institute's internal planning and mission. Chief Justice Roberts's opinion in *McCutcheon* and Justice Kennedy's comments in *Citizens United* reflect a belief that transparency *enables* the voting public to learn about the role of money in elections. Yet this availability does not in any way suggest that the public will avail itself of the resource.[28] We think that the ways the Institute's data could be transmitted to the voting public might include intermediaries, such as the media (discussed below), and voter education efforts, such as Project Vote Smart or the League of Women Voters.[29] These intermediaries are geared toward educating the voters, rather than advocating specifically for some campaign-finance related activity.

And so, in all likelihood, a focus on informing the general public about campaign finance data is bound to be limited to efforts to make the database of campaign finance disclosures available. Direct outreach to the public does not hold much promise, although outreach through intermediaries (which are well represented in the other audiences we will now discuss) seems a more appropriate tactic for improving usage of the Institute's data.

Journalists, Bloggers, and Other News Media

For a variety of reasons, the journalistic community is of immense importance to the Institute. The current executive director brings to the position a background in journalism and is keen to make sure the journalistic community remains aware of the Institute. Almost every aspect of the Institute's operations and strategy is cognizant of the media. Thinking of our logic model framework, program outputs, including the database itself and research reports, media press releases, and the like, are designed at least in part with the media in mind. The desired end outcome, although the Institute does not state it explicitly, is likely a greater quotient of data-informed news reports on the money behind candidates, officials, and government actions as reported by all types of media. The alignment of these outputs and outcomes seems reasonable; certainly, the nature of the Institute as a 50-state database provider makes it a go-to destination if and when the media are interested in stories with cross-state components.

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[28] The Supreme Court also has assumed, to an extent, that the information on financial disclosure will be made available in a manner timely enough to affect the vote decision. Given the time lags in state processing of the disclosure forms and the time lag in the Institute's processing and release of the data, this seems unlikely. That said, there are opportunities for inquiry into the ways money given in previous election cycles may or may not be influencing current legislative decisions. But the election cycles are too short for real-time transmission of the disclosure data at present.

[29] Project Vote Smart, website, undated, and League of Women Voters, "Making Democracy Work," website, undated. For example, the League of Women Voters of Marin County provides a link to the Institute's website on its election page (League of Women Voters of Marin Conty, "Election: November 2014," 2014).

To be clear, we do not have a representative random sample of journalists to pull from in our evaluation. That is beyond the scope of our effort. We focused on users of the Institute's data to understand why they are using the data and how they viewed the experience. Overall, each of the journalists with whom we spoke was very appreciative of the Institute as a resource for information on the sources of money in politics. They used terms like "gold standard," "an invaluable and awesome tool," and "a gold mine." If we are to think about impact as providing a key resource to a community and receiving high marks from that community in terms of quality and usefulness, these responses should be quite heartening. Interestingly, though, as we report, the community sees value and opportunity in different areas. A summary of some key conversations provides insight into impact and the varied nature of journalism in a digital era.

New and Social Media May Prefer "Linkable" or "Sharable" Content

Marc Cooper, Professor of Professional Practice and Director of Annenberg Digital News at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, provided much helpful context for the way emerging media relates to resources like the Institute. "The issue of money in politics is more important now than ever, and especially after *McCutcheon*" Professor Cooper remarked. "But there is a gap in cultivating [data mining and interpretational] skills. There is substantial interest in the outcomes of the data analysis, but the lifting is heavy to get there." Himself a user of the Institute's data, Professor Cooper is also an overseer of students who regularly use the Institute. In this regard, Professor Cooper has a direct line of sight into the ways the next generation of journalists relates to data resources. This new generation has more of an appreciation for sharing content generated by someone else's effort:

> The old model of investigative work was to work in the data and write up a story, link up with a distribution channel, like *60 Minutes*, and produce the story for the public. That process has become increasingly less important because important content can go viral without being centrally managed.

The Institute is extremely well positioned here, and its research reports—smaller digests that highlight the key donors and trends in state-level giving—are useful content that can be a launch pad for more sustained analysis. These digests are having valuable impact for new media agents who might lack skill, time, or experience to perform their own data analysis. Putting this in a different light, Professor Cooper, paraphrasing journalist and professor Jeff Jarvis, says the mantra of the day is "do what you do best, and link to the rest." This focuses the question on what linkable material the Institute is or could be generating: material that will support the emerging and increasingly networked "sharing" journalistic community. Professor Cooper noted that the "new guys all link to Nate Silver and the like, so they can better spend their resources elsewhere; any expectation that these news organizations are going to have the capability to

analyze the data in a timely way is unrealistic."[30] New media likes the research report content; they would like to see more of it, more frequently.

Investigative Media Are Using Both the Raw Data and the Research Reports

On the other hand, a shift in focus to social media and new media techniques that have a strong emphasis on sharing content created by others may not meet the needs of traditional media professionals. The traditional or investigative media retain a commitment to producing content. This focus on producing content generates a different perspective and reveals the role that biases in story selection can play in affecting the likelihood of the Institute's resources informing the public debate. This bias is a natural barrier to the Institute's impact.

It was suggested, and we think it a reasonable assertion, that there is a perceived bias in traditional national media in favor of federal election coverage. This would present a natural barrier to the Institute's penetration into this market because, at present, it collects only state data. "Everyone knows Open Secrets, but fewer know Follow the Money," remarked one traditional reporter working in campaign finance, indicating that the Center for Responsive Politics' federal campaign finance database is a more commonly used source than the Institute's state data.

Conversely, state and local media outlets may be intensely interested in the role of money in state elections but are less likely to be interested in the full cross-state analyses that the Institute's data enable.[31] Moreover, there is likely a preference among state and local media professionals to go directly to their state election officials for information on donor activity in the state. This substitute source of information—actually, the primary source—undercuts the need to use the Institute's database.[32]

Despite these barriers, traditional media know about the Institute and are using its data and research—and have been doing so more often in recent years. We interviewed an investigative journalist from a major online political news service who has used the Institute's data on many occasions (who wishes to remain anonymous). He was very supportive and finds great value in the database the Institute provides because it allows him to research both micro-level giving and

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[30] Nate Silver is the founder and contributor to FiveThirtyEight, which began as a polling data aggregator in which Silver also provided sophisticated data analytics and predictions of electoral outcomes. For an example of this behavior, see Rick Hasen, "NIMSP Issues Report on 2008 Ballot Measure Spending," Election Law Blog post March 9, 2010.

[31] This is not to say that using other states' data as a point of reference is unlikely. Knowing whether a neighboring or similar state experiences similar patters of giving to political campaigns can add to a richer and more informative story. We mean only to suggest that state and local media seem less likely to be using a full 50-state comparison in their reports.

[32] All is not lost, however, because the Institute could provide an easier interface than state election officials' offices. Our discussions with journalists from traditional media revealed a desire for the Institute to provide links to the state websites with the specific data sources or with PDF versions of the disclosure records themselves. This would allow the journalists the opportunity to access the data and do their quality check all through the Institute's site.

overall trends. Donation histories for individuals, industries, and PACs are particularly useful, and he remarked that the Institute is indispensable when trying to do research across multiple states. Given the different campaign finance laws, disclosure rules, and formats in place in the states, having a "one-stop shop" for all the data is a great benefit. In fact, he suggested that many reporters would not report on multistate giving in the absence of the Institute's database. The collection effort would be too time consuming.

On the question of content generation and the preference for sharable analyses, rather than see-for-yourself searches of the Institute's database, this reporter expressed a rather different perspective. From his viewpoint as a more traditional journalist, the Institute might become a competitor if it goes too far down the path of content generation. The danger would be the alienation of the traditional media community. While a possibility, our review of several news reports that cite Institute research (rather than stories that use the reporter's own analysis of data) suggests that even traditional media are interested in the results of the Institute's analyses. Numerous stories in traditional media have incorporated research reports generated by the Institute itself.[33] In fact, these sorts of reports can drive users to the Institute, providing a boost to the overall level of awareness of the Institute and interest in matters concerning campaign finance.

Summary of Impact Through a Journalistic Audience

Overall, the representatives of the journalistic community with whom we spoke identified the Institute as a valuable resource on state campaign finance data, particularly when the community needs information on donation behavior that crosses state lines. Traditional media are using the Institute both as a data resource and for its self-generated research reports on timely topics. The Institute is seen as independent, as adding significant value to the transparency movement, and as the preferred resource to use when reporting on issues of campaign finance in the states. Suggestions for greater impact in the community were distinctly in the direction of new and social media strategies, coupled with digested data.[34]

The Academic Communities

The academic community has long been an advocate of increased data collection and analysis, and it quickly identified the Institute's data resources as valuable. In 1982, Professor

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[33] See, for example, Niraj Chokshi, "Meet the Family that's Dropped $45 Million on Michigan Campaigns Since 2000," *Washington Post*, March 25, 2014. See also Maggie Clark, "Do Campaign Donations in Judicial Races Influence Court Decisions?" *Stateline*, The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2013. Compare these stories that reference Institute reports with an example of a data search, the results of which are part of the story: "Policymakers Need to Ask Hard Questions About Emergency Radio Equipment," editorial, *Sacramento Bee*, April 6, 2014.

[34] However, there was also support for efforts that would generate new skills, interest, and capabilities in investigative reporters. Denise Malan, of the Investigative News Network and Investigative Reporters and Editors, works with the Institute to match reporters' needs with appropriate data resources. She and the Institute are planning a workshop for reporters to increase familiarity with the Institute's data.

Malcolm Jewell wrote that the first priority in the study of state politics was the need for "a much more comprehensive and systematic collection and analysis of comparative state data." The Institute, it would seem, is filling this need on the supply side of the equation.

In fact, however, in much the same way as we split the journalistic community into some relevant component parts, the academic community ought to be thought of as academic *communities*. In Section 2, we provided a top-level glance at the number of academic journals (mostly in the field of political science) that use the Institute's data as part of their empirical research. We also identified the legal academic community's more frequent use. To better understand the data and its use by the academic communities, we delved into this literature more deeply to discover what is being used and for what purposes. Here, we provide a few choice examples of research that sheds light on the role of money in politics—certainly an area of impact that can trace its roots to the Institute's data.

The Journals Reveal a Strong Bias Toward Political Science Research—and that Research Almost Always Uses Methodologically Sophisticated Applications of the Database

"Does Money Buy Votes? The Case of Self-Financed Gubernatorial Candidates, 1998–2008,"[35] by Adam Brown, would seem to be addressing exactly the sort of questions that the Institute hopes to inspire. Challenging the popular wisdom that the candidate with the most money is likely to prevail, Brown argued that the likelihood of winning is what attracts money, not the other way around. Campaign donors, he argued, are strategic in their use of donations, directing their support to candidates that are already of high quality and likely to win their elections. He used data from the Institute to examine the difference in vote share across self-financed and externally financed candidates.

Another example of the sort of policy-relevant research into the role of money in state politics can be seen in "From the Schoolhouse to the Statehouse: Teacher Union Political Activism and U.S. State Education Reform Policy."[36] In this case, the authors used contributions to state campaigns from state teacher union interest groups to assess teacher union influence on policy outcomes. They concluded that "teacher unions are in fact influential players in state education reform debates and are ultimately effective in warding off the changes they oppose."

In a similar way, "Mediated Density: The Indirect Relationship Between U.S. State Public Policy and PACs" used the Institute's data to explore lobbying tactics and the demand for lobbying activity in the states.[37] The authors used the Institute data to explore the relationship

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[35] Adam R. Brown, "Does Money Buy Votes? The Case of Self-Financed Gubernatorial Candidates, 1998–2008," *Political Behavior*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2013, pp. 21–41.

[36] Michael Hartney and Patrick Flavin, "From the Schoolhouse to the Statehouse: Teacher Union Political Activism and U.S. State Education Reform Policy," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 3, September 2011, p. 259.

[37] Jennifer Benz, Justin H. Kirkland, Virginia Gray, David Lowery, Jennifer Sykes and Mary Deason, "Mediated Density: The Indirect Relationship Between U.S. State Public Policy and PACs," *State Politics & Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4, December 2011, pp. 440–459.

between lobbying activity and PACs, suggesting that PAC growth is the product of lobbyists looking for increased avenues for access to government officials.[38]

On the other end of the scale in the political science literature, a very limited number of articles cite the Institute's reports, in much the same way that the journalistic community notes the Institute's summary research.[39] While this is a sign of penetration into the community, it is a rare occurrence. The data are the main draw for the political scientists. And as the Institute continues to collect and expand the data set over time, the Institute's resource will become ever more valuable for assessing longitudinal trends about money in state politics.

On the legal academic side, however, the use of the Institute is much more varied; the legal community has been attracted to more of the applications and online tools than the political science community. Some law review articles use L-CAT to link donations with specific pieces of legislation pending before committees.[40] Others have targeted search results, such as the amount of money above $50 given in the state of Texas for electoral contests for the Supreme Court of Texas.[41] And still others come from advocacy organizations that are using law journals as an outlet for their analyses.[42] In general, the legal academic literature has a much more varied approach to the Institute's products, perhaps suggesting that Institute's efforts to make search functionality more user friendly are a sound approach.

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[38] Yet a cautionary note is worth mentioning at this time. In the Benz et al., 2011, the authors provide this caveat:

> [T]he raw data generously provided by the Money in Politics Institute through special data requests still required considerable cleaning before they were usable. That is, the state lists included large numbers of individual contributors and duplicates of PAC contributors. Recoding to eliminate these cases reduced the initial list of 222,592 PACs to 162,352 PACs. Thus, our experience should serve as a cautionary tale to researchers who are using the institute's data without further refinement. (p. 445)

In fact, the authors issue the same caveat, verbatim, in another article that uses the Institute's data. See David Lowery, Virginia Gray, Jennifer Benz, Mary Deason, Justin Kirkland, and Jennifer Sykes, "Understanding the Relationship Between Health PACs and Health Lobbying in the American States," *Publius*, Vol. 39, No. 1, 2009, pp. 70–94.

We note the intense level of scrutiny that academic researchers are, and should be, giving to the data resources the Institute provides. In some ways, the academic community is going to be the harshest critic of the Institute when it comes to the data. Indeed, as we discuss below, that is what we heard during our interviews. The duplication issue described in the "Mediated Density" article was not significant enough to interfere with the researchers' efforts. But the experience serves to reiterate the point we made in Section 2, that the instrumental value of a data resource is conditional on the quality of the information it contains.

[39] See, for example, Owen G. Abbe and Paul S. Herrnson, "Public Financing for Judicial Elections? A Judicious Perspective on the ABA's Proposal for Campaign Finance Reform," *Polity*, Vol. 35, No. 4, July 2003, pp. 535–554.

[40] Jennifer S. Senior, "Expanding the Court's First Amendment Accessibility Framework for Analyzing Ballot Initiative Circulator Regulations," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 2009, pp. 529ff.

[41] Darcie Cobden, "Comment: "'Ms. Placed' Presumptions in the Texas Election Code: Texas Legislature Tightening the Old Ball and Chain on Political Contributions Made by the Spouses of Lawyers," *South Texas Law Review*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Spring 2009, pp. 529–557.

[42] See, for example, Bert Brandenberg and Roy A. Schotland, "Justice in Peril: The Endangered Balance Between Impartial Courts and Judicial Election Campaigns," *Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, Vol. 21, No. 4, Fall 2008, pp. 1229–1258.

Beyond the political science and legal literature, fewer articles appear to cite the Institute's data. Only one article turned up in our review from economics-focused journals on the journal database, JSTOR,[43] and a mere handful of economics results appeared in a Google Scholar review.[44] At first blush, this skew in usage seems reasonable, given the specialization of academic journals. But we also cannot rule out that the journal databases we used for our review may not be capturing all the literature. Hence, we reiterate that citation counts are an imperfect tracker of impact. At the same time, the push for interdisciplinary work could drive interest in the data in these new academic communities. It is not likely that they will use the data without being introduced to the database in some fashion. Our interviews with scholars, to which we now turn, hold some suggestions for this academic outreach.

Interviews with Scholars and a Literature Review Suggest the Institute Needs to Disclose Its Methodologies and Improve the Website Experience

Of the end user communities, the most emphatic constructive criticism for the Institute came from the academics. Representing a very sophisticated user base, the academic community is inherently the most skeptical about purported relationships between money and outcomes in politics, and in the exercise of their skepticism, they are keenly attuned to matters of data collection, distribution, and analytic rigor. These practitioners are highly skilled users of big data and have their own special needs and perspectives on the Institute's activities.

All the academics supported the efforts of the Institute and expressed strong desire that the Institute continue its data collection efforts across the states. There is no other resource available that provides the academic communities with the raw data. This seems to justify our approach to defining impact in a way that includes recognition of the value of the data and the database itself. The academics expressed skepticism that there was likely to be another such repository in the near future. Some academics, who have had their own experience collecting 50-state data in the past, have previously published reports about their experiences and highlighted the difficulty of such efforts.[45] The Institute, in short, is the go-to resource for the academics working in this area, just as it is for journalists (but the academic community is almost exclusively interested in the data themselves, not in the Institute's self-generated research).

And yet there are reasons scholars may not be drawn to the data. Unlike research undertaken by a scholar who has collected his or her own data, created a scheme for coding the information, and then performed statistical analysis, the Institute's data are already coded in many ways.

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[43] Deniz Igan, Prachi Mishra, and Thierry Tressel, "A Fistful of Dollars: Lobbying and the Financial Crisis," *NBER Macroeconomics Annual*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2011, pp. 195–230.

[44] But, for an example of use of the Institute data by Federal Reserve Bank researchers, see Stephan Whitaker, "Private-Activity Municipal Bonds: The Political Economy of Volume Cap Allocation," working paper, Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland, September 2010.

[45] See, Jennifer M. Jensen and Thad Beyle, "Of Footnotes, Missing Data, and Lessons for 50-State Data Collection: The Gubernatorial Campaign Finance Project, 1977–2001," *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 203–214.

Here, the academic community might be wary if the coding rules and the choices the Institute makes when inputting data are not clear. One scholar, a leader in the field of state politics and policy, told us of difficulties when using the Institute's data. Interested in a precise issue that hinged on coding contributions in a particular way, the scholar disagreed with some of the decisions Institute staff made when uploading data. While not an unsolvable problem, the difference added considerable effort to the analytic task.[46] While these "cleaning" processes are inherent to data analysis, the Institute ought to be aware that the social scientific community will most highly value data that are both available and transparent. On a related topic, the same scholar also noted that, while the Institute has begun to expand the types of data it collects, the new data would be of limited use until the full 50-state data gathering effort is complete. In the state politics scholarly community, there is a strict need for full representation when conducting large comparative analyses. Without the full data, there will be little sustained attention.

Summary of Impact Through a Scholarly Audience

Armed with the Institute's data, the academic communities that are actively using the Institute's data, while small, are undertaking the level of work and research that the Institute most strongly desires from the academic community: independent evaluation by highly skilled practitioners that can reveal the hidden effects of money in politics. Because of its high level of sophistication when it comes to handling large data, however, this group has unique data needs that the Institute can address better in the future.

Beyond this small cadre of sophisticate data users, other scholars providing their own legal gloss on issues of campaign finance tend to be heavy users of targeted searches and of the Institute's own research reports. Seen in tandem with the researchers who manipulate the large database, the academic communities are actively using the Institute's data and research in ways that get published in peer-reviewed journals. However, not all relevant academic fields are publishing analyses informed by the Institute's data; the main users are the political and legal communities.

The Advocacy and Research Groups

The last category of Institute data users we explored is what we have called advocacy and research groups. This category is represented by nonprofit organizations that have a social or public policy goal as part of their core mission. The advocacy groups do much of the heavy lifting in terms of bringing the Institute's impact squarely into the public policy space, and the research groups (much like the academics) offer analysis and distribution of new ideas in the field of campaign finance. Since the Institute does fairly little advocacy (and what it does is limited to issues of transparency), it is these advocacy groups who are the front-line foot soldiers

[46] To be clear, however, the scholar continues to use the Institute's data as part of an active research agenda.

fighting for changes to public policy. If advocating for and effecting change are the strongest indicators of impact, it is likely to be found through the activities of this group.

Within this group are many different advocacy organizations. Some of these, such as the Sunlight Foundation,[47] are close partners with the Institute. The Sunlight Foundation identifies itself as

> a nonpartisan nonprofit founded in 2006 that uses the power of the Internet to catalyze greater government openness and transparency. … Our overarching goal is to achieve changes in the law to require real-time, online transparency for all government information, with a special focus on the political money flow and who tries to influence government and how government responds.[48]

Both Sunlight and the Institute are key players in the area of campaign finance transparency, and Sunlight is a particularly heavy user of the Institute's data. Another example is the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University School of Law,[49] which has worked closely with the Justice at Stake Campaign and the Institute on a data collection and dissemination effort pertaining to state judicial elections.[50] That partnership has produced a series of reports that have helped raise interest in judicial selection and judicial electoral finance.[51]

But also included in this group are such organizations as the Justice Policy Institute, a nonprofit organization that works in the area of criminal justice reform, with a focus on reducing rates of incarceration. Its work on prison privatization (the availability and use of private prison operators to meet the needs of state and federal criminal justice systems) is a good example of the sort of investigative policy work that can be done using the Institute's database.[52] Yet prison privatization is just one piece of the Justice Policy Institute's work, suggesting that it uses the Institute when there is a very specific need for linking campaign finance with state policy.[53] Rather than the partnership model (Sunlight), the Justice Policy Institute is using the Institute as a resource that informs their specific policy needs.[54] Yet another example is the Campaign

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[47] Sunlight Foundation, website, undated.

[48] Sunlight Foundation, "Our Mission," web page, undated.

[49] Brennan Center for Justice, website, undated.

[50] Justice at Stake, website, undated.

[51] For the reports published as part of this effort, see The New Politics of Judicial Elections Online, "Previous Reports," web page, 2014.

[52] Justice Policy Institute, *Gaming the System: How the Political Strategies of Private Prison Companies Promote Ineffective Incarceration Policies*, Washington, D.C., June 22, 2011.

[53] The Institute has also self-published work on the campaign finance behavior of private prison companies. See, for example, Edwin Bender, "Private Prisons, Politics & Profits," NIMSP, July 1, 2000, Edwin Bender, "A Contributing Influence: The Private Prison Industry and Political Giving in the South," NIMSP, April 28, 2002.

[54] We note that organizations across the political spectrum have used the Institute's data. See, for example, a report by the libertarian Cato Institute, which has used NIMSP data in its analysis of political giving patterns by union: Chris Edwards, "Public-Sector Unions," *Cato Institute Tax & Budget Bulletin*, No. 61, March 2010.

Finance Institute,[55] which is a think-tank–like organization that conducts analysis and provides recommendations for policy on campaign finance.

We interviewed Adam Skaggs, former counsel for the Brennan Center for Justice and coauthor of the reports produced by the NIMSP–Brennan–Justice at Stake partnership mentioned above. "None of that [the judicial elections work] would have been done without the Institute," he told us. "The Institute's data is the backbone of those reports." Like the partnership with the Sunlight Foundation, the close relationship between the Institute and the Brennan Center's money in politics program, and the very nature of the advocacy geared toward campaign finance transparency, make for a neat fit.

More-entrepreneurial advocacy takes the Institute's data and uses them for other policy areas. Bruce Freed, of the Center for Political Accountability (CPA),[56] uses Institute data to address the supply side of money in politics. In its own words,

> CPA is the only group to directly engage companies to improve disclosure and oversight of their political spending. This has included soft money contributions and payments to trade associations and to other tax-exempt organizations, such as nonprofit 'social welfare' 501(c)(4) organizations, that are used for political purposes.[57]

Like Skaggs, Freed notes that the Institute is the only resource for getting political spending at the state level (other than collecting data from every state election office). Freed and his staff use the database itself, looking into corporate spending in the states. The result of their research and advocacy is the adoption of political donation disclosure and corporate policies for political giving at more than 100 companies. Here, we have a case of Institute data being used by a third party in a way that has effected real change. And in Freed's opinion, without the Institute's data resource, that change would not have been possible.

Capturing just a snapshot of the advocacy and research organizations that might fall into this category—those which have partnered with the Institute or are using their data—reveals a large number of groups that either would not do what their missions state or could not do what they do as well were the Institute not available as a resource. The following are some of some of the most prominent ones:

- Americans for Campaign Reform
- Brennan Center for Justice
- Campaign Finance Institute
- Campaign Legal Center
- Center for Public Integrity
- Center for Responsive Politics

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[55] Campaign Finance Institute, website, undated.

[56] Center for Political Accountability, website, undated.

[57] Center for Political Accountability, "About the CPA," web page, undated.

- Coalition for Accountability in Political Spending
- Common Cause
- GovTrack
- Investigative News Network
- Investigative Reporters and Editors
- Justice at Stake Campaign
- Justice Policy Institute
- MapLight
- People for the American Way
- ProPublica
- Public Citizen
- Sunlight Foundation
- Transparency International.

This environment, with so many players, is more robust because of the work of the Institute—and many of these organizations would not exist if the Institute were not collecting and distributing its data resource. We are drawn to thinking about the impact of the Institute on this network of advocacy groups, once again from the perspective of *ecology*—ecology studying not living organisms but campaign transparency and advocacy communities with important data relationships between them.[58] This ecology perspective represents a major avenue of leverage and impact for the Institute's data. Thinking about ecology raises more questions. If the ecology is built on data relationships, the question is not "does the Institute have impact," but how can this ecology be further nourished with data. Can the Institute illuminate the shadows of state campaign finance in ways that encourage further growth in the ecology? We turn to that set of questions in Section 4.

Conclusions: A Rich Ecosystem Is Made Possible by the Institute's Data

In this section, we proffered an understanding of impact that departs from a direct chain of cause-and-effect actions. In its place, we offered an ecological view that is more appropriate for understanding the Institute as a data and information resource—one that provides secondary and tertiary users with a wealth of information that they can then use to bolster their own policy-motivated and knowledge-generating activities.

Taking this perspective from ecology, we focused on identifying and interviewing key users of the Institute's data and research: representatives from academic, journalistic, and advocacy communities and thought-leaders from the field of campaign finance. From these interviews and a review of the representative organizations' products, we found that the Institute is well

[58] We are, of course, not the first to use the language of ecology when describing issue groups or advocacy organizations. See, for example, David Lowery and Virginia Gray, "The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch, or the Natural Regulation of Interest Group Numbers in the American States," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 39, No. 1, February 1995, pp. 1–29.

positioned to provide the data that are presently in demand—and are likely to be increasingly demanded in a post-*McCutcheon* environment.

What is more, the Institute itself, in a post-*McCutcheon* environment, is sitting at the doorstep of one of the most important policy areas in the country today. The Supreme Court's recognition of the Institute's role in disseminating campaign finance information is convincing evidence of the Institute's recognition by high-level decisionmakers. And, while outside the control of the Institute itself, there is evidence that the advocacy community has used the Institute's data to achieve actual changes in public policy relating to corporate disclosure of contributions and adoption of policies regarding political activities.

Equally as important, however, was our earlier argument that the Institute's data—in this case, data that are imbued with tremendous import for a democratic society—are valuable both because of their instrumental value and because of the effort the Institute has put into collecting, coding, auditing, and disseminating (free of charge) its database. This has enabled the subsequent analyses and advocacy. This enabling—the enabling of an ecosystem of campaign finance related advocacy work, in addition to the attention shown by journalistic and scholarly communities—is evidence of impact.

4. Recommendations and Conclusions

The NIMSP hired the RAND Corporation to help the Institute understand how it is having an impact in the public discussion over the role of money in politics. We were asked to help the Institute understand and operationalize "impact" and to look into the users of Institute data and research reports to glean insights into how the Institute can have greater impact in the future. We recognize that these questions are important not only to the Institute but also to the foundation community of supporters who, in stewarding scarce resources, seek to maximize their giving along dimensions that loosely track "impact." We have assumed, from the beginning of this research, that this broader community of interest was an important intended audience for this work.

As we reported earlier, we believe that impact assessment for a data resource requires a perspective that looks to more than counts of webpage hits and citations to the database. Those metrics seem somewhat inapt. Of course, more citations and references and reports are probably better than fewer. But an organization like the Institute has a goal of raising awareness, of informing, and of enabling insight. As we are allowed to peer into the once shadowy world of money in politics, the Institute—as it shines its empirical light at the shadowy intersection of money and politics—can illuminate, and thereby encourage and promote independent investigation.

Our review brought us to the Institute itself—its staff, its mission, its database of campaign disclosures, and its methods of dissemination. Our review also brought us to a very diffuse set of users of the data—from distinguished professors, to independent journalists, to front-line activists. The fact that so many and so varied users find value in the data and transform the Institute's resource into new efforts and new ideas is a testament both to the importance of the data themselves and to the Institute's efforts and impact.

It is our view that the Institute serves an important purpose—to undertake the collection, centralization, and dissemination of state-level campaign finance data. No other organization has been successful in this effort or is likely to be. Regardless of the present level of usage of the Institute's data by third-party users, the efforts to gather these data and make them available to the public are impactful.

Fortunately, there indeed are many third parties who have discovered and used the Institute's data in ways that add value. All the audiences the Institute seeks to engage have found value in the Institute's efforts. The most successful of these are the scholarly, journalistic, and advocacy communities. The interviewees we spoke with were impressed, indebted to the Institute, and expressed an inability to do the sort of research, reporting, and advocacy on state campaign finance without the Institute.

Notwithstanding the significant impact of the Institute's efforts, there are ways that impact can be increased. As with any public resource, there are ways that the Institute's database and research products can be better leveraged in the future. We next share some of the suggestions the users we interviewed offered, as well as our own perspectives.

Awareness, Interest, and Capability Are Challenges to Third-Party Use of Institute Data

"Big data" has become a catchphrase for the availability of mass quantities of information and the emergent computing power to handle and analyze the data. But with the advent of more information and more powerful computing comes a set of challenges that need to be overcome before users are aware of, interested in, and able to use the data for their purposes. These three challenges to big data presently face the Institute—as a provider of big data—when dealing with each of its target audiences.

Our first proposed challenge is that of awareness. Before the Institute's data can be used, the intended users need to be aware that its resource is available for public consumption. Some audiences may naturally be drawn to large-scale data resources on campaign finance (such as campaign watchdogs or, perhaps, academic researchers). Others are likely to need a bit more encouragement. Our discussions with the Institute revealed that there is an active, but limited, program of engagement with various audiences. The limitations are resource driven. For present purposes, we feel it worth noting that additional outreach activities would be needed if the focus at the Institute expands from curating and maintaining its database (upper left-hand side of the logic model in Figure 2.1) to dissemination and outcome (bottom half of Figure 2.1).

Yet awareness, alone, will not be enough to drive usage of the data in a way that satisfies the Institute's ambitions. One peril the Institute needs to avoid is the assumption that data's importance alone, because of their democratic value, will suffice to drive traffic to the website. Yet for informational resources (such as a database of campaign finance contributions), merely compiling the information—accurate and democratically relevant though it may be—does not suffice to drive users to the resource. So, from the start, a campaign finance data "Field of Dreams" would be an inappropriate model for the Institute because mere awareness of the resource is insufficient to drive usage of the data.

Similarly, efforts toward advertising and marketing the database of campaign finance information may also be insufficient to generate the level of *interest* and uptake that the Institute would like to see. Here, the danger is not so much that people might not come to the Institute but that the users might not desire to make use of the resource once they are aware of it. Colloquially, this would be the problem of "leading horses to water." Merely providing the resource is not sufficient to instill in end users a thirst for knowledge, so to speak. The interest in using the data for some outside purpose is a necessary (but still insufficient) condition for the Institute and its data to achieve impact.

Finally, even if the an identifiable population of end users knows about (awareness), and has a thirst for the information contained in the Institute's database (interest), the users must have the *capability* to deploy the data for some interesting use. Capability can come in a number of forms. At the extreme end, some users who are interested in untangling the systemic role money plays in state politics would need to be able to perform very sophisticated statistical analyses to wrest the insights that are potentially locked within the Institute's data. That is likely to be a small pool of users—but users who will have special needs when it comes to data format, disclosure of methods of collection and coding, and "static" forms of the data for replication purposes. On the other end of the spectrum, a single user interested in a local candidate's campaign finance information might be better served through his or her state's election office and might be intimidated by the idea of a 50-state database that requires elaborate search terms and parameters to access.

In an Environment of Limited Resources, the Institute Should Triage Outreach Efforts to Identify the Right Mix of Awareness, Interest, and Capability

If we are correct in our assessment that these three challenges to the use of big data present real threats to various audiences' using the Institute's data, we think it appropriate that the Institute and its supporters consider the highest priority audiences they wish to reach. This triage approach recognizes the scarcity of resources—and, perhaps more importantly, the need to dedicate significant resources to maintaining the core of the effort—for the continuously updated database of state campaign finance disclosures. In short, with more resources, we think more can be done by way of audience outreach. But the need to use resources effectively causes us to identify where we think priorities ought to be placed.[59]

The General Public May Be More Effectively Reached Through Partnerships with Voter Education Organizations

In the previous section, we began our review of the user communities with a brief discussion of the general public. We understand that there is a desire on the part of the Institute and the foundations that provide the financial support to the Institute to focus some of the Institute's efforts on improving its retail efforts at reaching public users. From a data accessibility

[59] We note, briefly, that the Institute is rolling out a new version of its website in the near future. Part of this effort is designed to better meet the needs of different audiences. In our opinion, the website refresh is a step in the right direction. Current format, design, and ease of use could be improved, and several interviewees thought that the website was itself a hindrance to use of the Institute's data. The key to the success of the website refresh will be the availability of clearly marked features that appeal to the various audiences the Institute wants to reach (the "journalists, academic researchers, public-interest groups, government agencies, policymakers, students and the public at large," according to its mission statement). Each of these communities has a natural affinity for the type of information the Institute has gathered, yet their needs when using the data and the paths they take to the Institute itself can vary dramatically. Keeping the multiple customer base in mind will be a challenge, but the beta version of the new website shows clear signs of improvement.

standpoint, this seems unobjectionable. If the public were to use the Institute's data and research products to learn about the role of money in state politics, who would be opposed?

The reality we see, however, is one in which the general public faces all three of the data challenges we described earlier. Each dimension—awareness of the Institute, interest in campaign finance data, and capability of inputting search requests into a large database—stand as significant obstacles to direct public usage of the Institute's resources. Campaign finance does not have the immediate salience to voters, who are more mobilized by issues that effect them personally. And, even if the public were aware of the Institute and interested in campaign finance disclosures, we have doubts that they would be interested in much more than the "My District" features, which are already fully functional on the Institute's website.

Instead of an Institute-led effort toward greater outreach to the public, an alternative strategy could try to partner with civic organizations—or even state elections offices[60]—to connect voters to the Institute's information. We mentioned previously that the League of Women Voters and Project Vote Smart might be logical partners as nonpartisan organizations that seek to educate and connect voters with relevant information.[61] This would allow the Institute to focus its attention outreach efforts elsewhere while proving these educational groups with valuable content.

Journalists, Bloggers, and News Media Should Continue to Be Priority Audiences, with Special Attention to Leveraging New and Social Media

Compared with the general population, members of the media are likely to have higher levels of awareness, interest, and capabilities. Writers whose beat is political news are likely to come across the Institute at some point in their careers. Most of the journalists we interviewed were directed to the Institute by word of mouth or through online searches related to campaign finance.

As campaign finance waxes and wanes in the national attention, the focus on the Institute is likely to adjust as well. Yet it is important to distinguish between types of media and the needs of professionals in each category. Investigative media, for example, have a different set of constraints and incentives from those of emergent social media. We draw the distinction between investigative and social and, to a much lesser extent, between traditional and new media only to

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[60] Several states and municipalities have online links to Institute data sources, suggesting that there is demand for this type of information from state agencies. For example, see Idaho Secretary of State Election Division, website, undated; Montana Commissioner of Political Practices, "Political Practices—General Topics: Frequently Asked Questions, web page, undated; New Mexico Secretary of State, "Election Data Overview," web page, undated; Utah Lieutenant Governor, "Elections," web page, undated; Government Accountability Board, State of Wisconsin, website, undated.

[61] The California Voter Foundation is another example of this sort of partnership (California Voter Foundation, "Welcome," web page, July 14, 2014). Its online resource, linked to information from MapLight, provides information on California candidates and propositions. The core data on campaign contributions from MapLight, we note, actually come from the Institute. This is an instance of the Institute's reach and impact being obscured by layers of secondary and tertiary users and repackagers of the Institute's data.

clarify the activities in which these communities are engaged. Our purpose in drawing the distinction here is not to wade into media theory but to signal that the importance of the recognition of media and journalists ought not to be thought of in a single way—in effect, that they will differ in their levels of awareness, interest, and capability.

Our conversations with media professionals suggest that new media may have lower levels of awareness of the Institute but that these levels could be overcome with an effort toward producing more Institute-generated analysis of the data that is specifically designed for "shareability" on social media. The desire was expressed for very timely digested reports (or even blog postings) that the Institute could develop and shared widely. This content generation might solve two problems: raising awareness and eliminating the need (or perceived need) to undertake the heavy lifting involved in sifting through the database. To do this effectively, though, the Institute would need to focus more strategically on marketing and the ability to leverage social media. The danger to impact in the new media community, then, is sclerosis in sharing, in relevance, and in public profile.

The Institute already considers new media strategies, to some extent, but resources are again limiting the degree to which this new programing can be added to effort. The Institute is also reaching out to investigative reporters—with a scheduled training session later this year on the Institute's data and how it can be used in public reporting. This is a fine attempt to build capability in the current and next generation of reporters. But there are significant challenges: The ability to train is itself resource intensive and will reach but a small portion of the journalistic community if the Institute manages the training. It may be more productive to partner more formally with the communication and journalism schools for annual symposia and training courses.

The Academic Community Is a Permanent Audience for the Database

The group with the highest level of awareness, interest, and capability is surely the academic community—yet here we note that the subsets of political science and legal academics are the most active in this area. But while the three challenges are minimized for this audience, there is a limit to the number of scholars who work in campaign finance—and those who do, likely already know of the Institute's contributions.

We suggest both widening the scholarly audience (to the degree possible) and deepening current relationships. To grow the audience, the Institute may place greater emphasis on connecting with academic conferences (particularly the State Politics and Policy Conference, sponsored by the State Politics and Policy section of the American Political Science Association),[62] partnering closely with university libraries, and exploring relationships with key data repositories, such as the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.[63]

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[62] See University of Mississippi Political Science, website, 2014.

[63] Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research, website, undated.

These avenues are also opportunities for deepening relationships, for more actively promoting the type of analyses the Institute would like to see academics producing, and for communicating the richness of the database for scholarly insight.

Some Advocacy Groups Likely Would Not Exist Without the Institute's Data; Sharing Resources Should Be a Priority

The advocacy groups are very active and are carrying out programs that lead to significant impact. Because the community of advocates is fed by the Institute's data on a regular basis, the leaders of these organizations know one another—often serving on each other's boards or advisory committees. This makes it likely that the Institute has reached a high level of saturation when it comes to awareness and interest in the Institute's data. Negotiating these relationships—and insisting on attribution when the Institute's data are a part of secondary and tertiary analyses—will be essential for the Institute when justifying its overall impact.

Furthermore, the advocacy community is also supported by a small handful of foundations, which often give widely to these advocacy groups and programs. This landscape of advocacy groups might be able to reorganize and leverage areas of overlapping interest.[64] For the Institute, however, there is a more sensitive issue when it comes to resourcing. While many of the advocacy organizations have larger budgets and engage in activities with more public recognition, the core of some of these programs is actually the Institute's data. If—and we think it may be the case—the financial supporters are attracted to the blossoms, but not to the root, there is a risk that the data resource will not survive. Data gathering is not a flashy business; but it is essential to the informed debate that the advocacy groups and their funders wish to achieve.

Conclusion

The review that we have provided introduced new audiences to the NIMSP, explored how we might think about the impact that the Institute has had on campaign finance discourse, and reported on our assessment of the various ways the Institute is having an impact. We also provided an overview of conversations we have had with selected end users of the Institute's data and resources. These revealed the deep appreciation and recognition of high value in the Institute's efforts and work product. The discussion has also revealed some of the challenges Institute faces as it thinks about how to increase its level of impact.

We conclude with two thoughts. First, we believe the Institute's data are providing transparency into money in state politics. The data resource illuminates the amounts and sources of money, and we hope that the Institute will continue to pursue the goal of gathering and

[64] We were given access to a study commissioned by the Ford Foundation that began to explore the relationships between transparency and government accountability groups. If this study indicates increased foundation interest in civic and government-related programming, the Institute ought to make the importance of its data very clear to the advocacy community.

centralizing state-level campaign finance data. Second, the goal of uncovering the ways that money influences the political system is likely to evolve as campaign finance laws evolve. As long as the Supreme Court continues to champion the value of disclosure as an antidote to untoward political behavior, there is a need for continued investigation into the connections between campaign donations and political outcomes. One thing seems certain: The task is immeasurably more difficult in the Institute's absence.

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