



Hewlett Foundation Madison Initiative Campaign Finance Data Cluster Assessment Top Line Findings

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In 2014 the Hewlett Foundation launched the three-year, \$50-million nonpartisan Madison Initiative with a goal of strengthening the ability of Congress to deliberate, negotiate, and compromise in ways that work for most Americans. As part of this broad-based Initiative, grants were made to three nonprofit organizations that aim to make campaign finance data and information available and accessible for different audiences:

- Center for Responsive Politics
- National Institute on Money in State Politics
- Campaign Finance Institute.

These three organizations act as campaign finance data “intermediaries.” They draw on campaign contribution and spending information available from government sources—primarily the Federal Elections Commission (FEC)—and apply coding, pattern recognition, contextualization, and sense-making techniques to support the work of scholars, journalists, and advocates in this space.

As part of the Madison Initiative’s evaluation process, in late 2015 the Center for Evaluation Innovation¹ conducted an assessment of the campaign finance data “cluster” (including the three grantee organizations). The assessment included an initial review of grantee materials and products, including grant proposals and reports, strategic plans, previous evaluation reports, and a variety of material available on grantees’ websites. Confidential interviews were then conducted with each grantee and with nine high-profile representatives of the audiences for these intermediaries. Interviewees included:

- three national media journalists who regularly cover this issue
- three nationally recognized campaign finance scholars and experts
- two prominent attorneys who counsel and litigate in this area
- a national government official with a long track record of experience in campaign finance.

The purpose for this assessment was to understand how campaign finance data are used, where audiences go to get their information, and how audience needs and the field itself may evolve. Five main findings emerged.

¹ The Center for Evaluation Innovation (CEI) is a nonprofit effort based in Washington D.C. that is building the field of evaluation in areas that are challenging to measure, like advocacy and systems change. CEI is evaluating The Madison Initiative.

1. Campaign finance data intermediaries play a role that government data sources cannot.

Audiences who rely on campaign finance data for scholarship, advocacy, or public storytelling use multiple sources to get their data, including going directly to the FEC for information and filings on political committees, historical data, and as the original data source to ensure accuracy. Audience respondents unanimously agreed, however, that what is available directly from government sources is, and will remain, insufficient on its own.

While the FEC is upgrading its website and database to improve data accessibility and use, respondents did not think new technology or the FEC's investments would eliminate the need for independent intermediaries. In addition, the FEC is unable to effectively play the contextualizing and sense-making role that intermediaries play because as a political entity it is deterred from providing information that might be construed as partisan (e.g., categorizing contributions by industry).

2. The Madison Initiative's three current grantees are all well known, respected, and valued.

According to audience respondents, each campaign finance grantee has distinct strengths.

Center for Responsive Politics (CRP) was mentioned most often as a favored source for federal-level data and acknowledged for its:

- Ability to analyze and highlight what is significant in the data
- Industry coding and categorizing of contribution data and inclusion of more data types, especially outside money.

National Institute on Money in State Politics (NIMSP) is highly valued as a one-stop shop for state-level campaign finance data and information on state campaign finance laws. The organization:

- Fills a role at the state level that no one else is filling
- Brings a spirit of collaboration to the work, exemplified by its annual convening in Montana.

Campaign Finance Institute (CFI) is viewed less as a data intermediary in comparison with CRP and NIMSP, and thus is somewhat less known in this space. Nonetheless, CFI was recognized for its:

- Descriptive analyses and reports on historic trends, such as the categorization of donations by size and sector
- Exemplary technical judgment and accuracy.

3. Intermediaries are struggling to retain their business models as nonprofit public service providers and are experiencing pressures to generate revenue and demonstrate impact in ways that may prove unpopular with their audiences.

Audience respondents agreed that the work of data intermediaries is vital to supporting transparency and accountability in government. They could not on their own fill the role that data intermediaries play. Yet intermediaries increasingly are being challenged to raise sufficient funding to support the infrastructure or "plumbing" they need to provide high-quality information. They feel pressure to

explore alternative funding sources, including adding new fees and new types of fee-for-service work. Meanwhile, audience respondents expressed strong reservations about paying for data intermediary services, both on philosophical (“it should be a public service”) and practical grounds (“my organization cannot afford to pay”).

Related to the challenges of fundraising, intermediaries also are feeling pressure to better demonstrate their impact. This has led to some considerations about providing more analyses or interpretations of campaign finance data for policymaker or public audiences. While audience respondents strongly value the sense-making role of intermediaries (categorizing, aggregating, highlighting patterns), they cautioned that others are better positioned to perform the next layer of analysis and data use through investigative journalism or advocacy, and that playing those roles would jeopardize intermediaries’ reputation for impartiality.

4. Audience respondents offered suggestions to increase the value of intermediaries.

The perceived value of intermediaries is expected to be sustained in the aftermath of *Citizens United* and other court decisions that have fueled public appetite for campaign finance disclosure and transparency. Audience respondents had several suggestions for how to increase intermediary relevancy and use:

- Journalists value flexibility and ease-of-use, and would like transparency in how data are coded and the ability to disaggregate and download data to perform their own analyses.
- Journalists and scholars want more focus on expenditures and the ability to understand who is profiting from campaign spending.
- Scholars want to link up different data sets and see additional descriptive analyses such as the timing of contributions and contributions to politicians across jurisdictions and time.
- Legal experts and scholars want to perform more sophisticated analytic queries on the data.
- All respondents want intermediaries to help them *anticipate* trends and patterns.

5. Intermediaries expressed the importance of tackling obstacles to accessing and making campaign finance data and information available, particularly regarding dark money and campaign expenditures.

Intermediaries expressed frustration over conditions that hamper their ability to paint a complete picture of the campaign finance ecosystem. For their work to positively impact the functioning of government, they felt that advocacy and better enforcement around disclosure laws is needed, both to seek additional transparency and to defend what exists now. They highlighted the need for:

- Increased accessibility and timeliness of data (e.g., through electronic filing with the FEC and digital access to Form 990’s from the IRS)
- Disclosure of more sources and types of campaign finance data (bundlers, fundraisers, etc.)
- Increased investment in effective consumption and use of campaign finance data
- Better storytelling to help the public see connections and the effects on their own lives
- More investigative reporting to bring about a tipping point that brings Americans back to the table of civic life.