Cal-Access 2.0: Building the Next California Electronic Filing and Online Disclosure System

Recommendations to the Secretary of State
from the California Voter Foundation

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The California Voter Foundation (CVF) was the leading proponent of California's electronic filing and online disclosure system, created through legislation enacted in 1997 and implemented in 2000. Since then, we have been ongoing consumers of the Cal-Access site and have historically used the data to compile lists of top donors to initiative campaigns featured in our California Online Voter Guide. We also advocated for a "search" tool that would allow the public to easily search and sort the campaign contribution and expenditure data contained in the disclosure reports. This tool became operational in 2003 and represented a significant improvement to the site. Since that time there have been some minor changes but otherwise Cal-Access has largely operated the way it was originally designed in 2000. The Secretary of State's recent partnership with Maplight has greatly enhanced the usability of the site, particularly the addition of the "Power Search" tool, and, in our view, exemplifies the value to the public of government and nonprofit partnerships.

Thanks to the enactment of Senate Bill 1349/Hertzberg in 2016, requiring a Cal-Access overhaul, as well as the enactment of SB 1001/Yee of 2012 providing dedicated funding support to improve Cal-Access on an ongoing basis, there is now an opportunity to make significant improvements that will further enhance public access to and understanding of California disclosure data.

We have recommendations in the following three categories:

> 1. Project approach;
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> 2. Integration with other online resources; and
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> 3. Data analysis, presentation and enhancements.

1. Project Approach

A.   We understand that one of the challenges of maintaining Cal-Access is due to the proprietary nature of the system. When building a new system, we urge you to ensure the State ends up with control of and full access and rights to the system's source code, to require that it be fully documented, and that you have the right to control and modify the system as needed, including the right to hire other contractors to work on it. Establishing these conditions at the outset will ensure long-term control over the project and prevent California from once again finding itself stuck with proprietary technology that cannot be modified or updated as needed. The Voting

Systems Assessment Project in Los Angeles is a good model to consider for this approach. To ensure the Secretary of State acquires a system over which it has control, we urge you to issue a draft RFP for public review and comment prior to its finalization.

B.   Since ongoing funding for this project will be obtained on a periodic basis, we encourage you to create discreet components that can be built one at a time on a priority basis. By developing discreet project components, features of the new system can be built in stages as funding becomes available.

C.   Coordination with other agencies: SB 1349 requires the Secretary of State to coordinate its efforts with the Fair Political Practices Commission and the Department of Technology and report periodically to the legislature. We also urge you to coordinate your efforts with other agencies, including the state's Legislative Counsel and your own Elections Division to maximize the usefulness of the disclosure data (more on that below).

D.   Consider developing a unified statewide disclosure system that allows both state and local candidates to file electronically and publish reports online. Even if that cannot be built right away it would be best to incorporate extensibility into the plans and structure the new system in a way that will allow a significant expansion of filers and data in the future should that become a possibility. It would also provide candidates who transition between local and state offices with a familiar disclosure experience, increasing compliance and decreasing the burden on candidates.

E.   The new system should focus less on replicating what the paper reports look like and more on efficiently extracting the data from those reports for easy and quick searching and sorting.

F.   Beta-test the system with a variety of users prior to launch, ranging from experts like journalists and investigators to casual, one-time users such a curious voter with limited internet experience.

2. Integration with other online resources

To enhance the usefulness of the data presented in Cal-Access, we would like to see the system better integrated with other resources on the Secretary of State's and other state agencies' web sites. For example:

A.   Committees formed to support initiatives in circulation should be linked to their listing on the Initiative and Referendum Qualification Status page of the Secretary of State's site and the listings on that page should link back to their disclosure statements. Doing this will make it easier for the public to identify the donors supporting initiatives while they are in circulation.

B.   Candidates listed in the Certified List of Candidates should be linked to their disclosure statements.

C.   The online version of the state Voter Information Guide (VIG) should link to the disclosure reports for any candidates featured in the VIG. Improvements have been made for ballot measure information thanks to SB 844/Pavley of 2014, but statewide candidates are not covered by this law and their disclosure statements should be easily findable from the online VIG as well.

D. Coordinate with Legislative Counsel to link bills listed in lobbying disclosure statements with official bill information online.

E. Coordinate with the FPPC to integrate online disclosure of officeholders' Statements of Economic Interest with Cal-Access, so a citizen researching a politician's campaign contributions can easily locate and view his or her conflict of interest reports (http://www.fppc.ca.gov/transparency/form-700-filed-by-public-officials.html).

3. Data analysis, presentation and enhancements

A. The Secretary of State's partnership with Maplight has been very beneficial for voters and could be extended to incorporate Maplight's excellent use of graphics to display campaign finance data in a more user-friendly format. Specifically, charts showing what portion of money comes from in state and out of state and which donors make up the bulk of a proposition's campaign money are incredibly useful tools that help voters quickly gain a clear picture of who the donors are behind a ballot measure.

B. Implement a standardized list of donor names so e-filing software auto-fills the donor's name and required information to promote data consistency across all filers and filings. Doing this will greatly reduce the amount of research an individual must conduct to accurately determine the total amount of money contributed to a committee by a single donor. It will also reduce the amount of data entry required by campaigns when complying with disclosure laws.

C. Provide an app that would allow the public to easily look up who the donors are to an initiative in circulation so people have the ability to easily look up donors on their smartphones when they are asked to sign a petition.

D. Work with the Fair Political Practices Commission and Maplight to create consistent and accurate displays of Top Ten Donors lists showing contributors for and against state propositions. New laws that require the integrating of these lists into official voter data represents a significant improvement in how California educates and prepares its voters to make informed, confident choices. In the last election, an app the Secretary of State developed pulled data from the Cal-Access Power Search tool which in some cases showed the same donors' names repeated multiple times on the Top Ten lists, differing from other official lists displayed on the FPPC's site. Even in an ideal disclosure system, it may not be possible to accurately determine who the top ten donors are without some review and editing of the data. However it is accomplished, it is our hope such lists will be identical when displayed to the public in any format by government agencies.

E. Design the system so visited links change colors, which will make conducting research on the site easier to manage.

F. Make it easier for the public to determine the cumulative amount donated from a single donor to a candidate or ballot measure, including late contributions.

G. Provide a way to display which committees are most active so users do not have to dig through numerous committees to find current donations. A single politician may have as many as a dozen committees that he or she is responsible for, yet only one or two is likely to be active at any one time.