



## **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 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.

With the infusion of dedicated funding support to improve the site on an ongoing basis due to the enactment of SB 1001 in 2012, there is now an opportunity to overhaul the website and make significant improvements that will enhance public access to and understanding of California disclosure data.

We have recommendations in the following three categories:

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

While our recommendations are extensive, we wish to emphasize #1.A. as the most important on our list.

### **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 you end 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 terms 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. 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. Several CVF Board members have legal, technical and policy experience with election agencies' procurement practices and we would like to weigh in on a draft RFP before the project goes out to bid to ensure the agency's control, transparency and flexibility needs are met.

- B. Since the funding for this project will be obtained on an ongoing, periodic basis, we encourage you to create discreet components that can be built one at a time on a priority basis, rather than waiting to get started when sufficient funding is available to undertake a complete overhaul all at once. The last time the Secretary of State developed a Feasibility Study Report for a new Cal-Access system, the price tag was \$10 million. We understand so far \$400,000 in funding has been obtained through SB 1001. By developing discreet project components, the new system can be built in stages as funding becomes available.
- C. Coordination with other agencies: we urge you to involve the Fair Political Practices Commission as well as the Government Operations Agency (GOA) in the process of creating the new system. Governor Jerry Brown noted in his SB 3 veto message that he is directing the GOA to consult with the Secretary of State and the Fair Political Practices Commission and come back with recommendations improving campaign disclosure and it would be beneficial to ensure all of these agencies are in coordination with each others' efforts.
- 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 would allow a significant expansion of filers and data in the future should that become a possibility.
- 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.

## **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 web site. 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 possible for the public to identify the donors supporting initiatives while they are in circulation.
- B. The Certified List of Candidates should link to the candidates' disclosure committees.
- C. The online version of the State Voter Information Guide should link to the disclosure reports for any candidates featured in the guide, as well as to committees supporting and opposing ballot propositions.

- D. Coordinate with Legislative Counsel to link bills listed in lobbying disclosure statements (and in summary information presented under the header “Bills/Agencies Lobbied (as filed)” with official bill information at <http://www.leginfo.ca.gov>.
- E. Coordinate with the FPPC’s new online disclosures of Statements of Economic Interest, 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/index.php?id=592>).

### **3. Data analysis, presentation and enhancements**

- A. Provide graphs that display the data in clear and understandable ways. Maplight’s “Voters Edge” guide is the premier example of how to best display disclosure data (see <http://votersedge.org/california/ballot-measures/2012/november/prop-30> for an example). Implement what Maplight is doing, using charts and graphs to show 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.
- 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.
- 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. Provide analysis that identifies the top donors to initiative campaigns. The Secretary of State used to publish reports summarizing the top donors for and against each initiative. Those reports were no longer published after Cal-Access went live. But the public still needs this user-friendly analysis and cannot be expected to wade through thousands of records from potentially dozens of committees to figure out who the main funders of a proposition campaign are.
- E. Make it feasible to print and post top donor lists in polling places on election day and to access such lists via a smartphone app (SB 27, currently pending in the State Legislature, if enacted will require committees that raise \$1,000,000 or more to self-identify their top ten donors).
- F. Design the system so visited links change colors, which will make conducting research on the site easier to manage.
- G. Make it easier for the public to determine the cumulative amount donated from a single donor to a candidate or ballot measure.
- H. Provide a way to display which committees are most active; 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. Make it easy for the public to tell right away which committee is most active so they don’t have to dig through numerous committees.
- I. Improve the user interface for accessing quarterly lobbying disclosure reports to make them more apparent. Currently, in order to access the quarterly reports, a user must click several times before reaching the option for “Financial Activity/Filing History” for a given entity, making them somewhat difficult to locate on the site.