

Municipal Campaign Finance Data Guidebook

Why do we need access to campaign finance data?

Campaign finance disclosure is an essential public accountability mechanism. As long as money affects political campaigns and elections, political finance disclosure will be necessary for democratic accountability.

Information showing the flow of money in politics should be made available to the public in a way that has as few restrictions as possible and empowers oversight. For campaign finance disclosure to live up to its full potential, the transparency it creates needs to provide accountability proportional to the power that the money seeks to influence, with real-time reporting and substantive disclosure empowering public scrutiny of political power at work.

The goal is to ensure that citizens have the ability to track influence -- to glean the context critical to understanding political decision-making and legislation. Disclosure of campaign contributions has always been upheld as constitutional in order to prevent corruption or the appearance of corruption.

Meaningful, complete, and open campaign finance data is vital to creating accountable government. Since the [landscape of municipal campaign finance data collection and disclosure varies greatly](#) from one city or county to the next, the Sunlight Foundation has created this guide to help local policymakers and advocates create stronger campaign finance disclosure.

Index:

1. What does a comprehensive campaign finance dataset include?
 1. Registration and termination
 2. Information about activity
 3. Context information
2. How should this data be collected and shared?
 1. Require disclosed information to be posted on the Internet
 2. Publish information as open, structured data
 3. Require electronic filing
 4. Release information in real-time
 5. Publish bulk data
 6. Require the use of unique identifiers
3. How does the government regulate this data?
4. How can this data be useful?
5. What other datasets add context to this data?

I. What does a comprehensive campaign finance dataset include?

Meaningful campaign finance data should include structured information from the reports that candidates, political action committees (PACs), and other groups file. Details such as where the money came from, who spent money, how much was spent, and what the money went toward form the foundation for a campaign finance dataset that can provide valuable insight into political influence on the local level. Here's the range of what we should be talking about when we talk about "campaign finance data":

1. Registration and Termination

Some of the most essential and basic information about candidate committees, PACs, and other kinds of groups that can receive and spend political money is found in the registration forms they file. Groups that are authorized to receive contributions or make expenditures related to the direct financing of elections should be required to register (though it should be noted this does not necessarily address dark money expenditures, which we explore below). Registration reports are usually fairly simple, and serve as a way to gather information about the candidate or group, the group's officers and contact information, and some details about where banking is done. Complete termination reports are equally important and help track details about the end status of campaigns or a group's activity -- along with any final contributions or expenditures.

What should be included:

- 1. Name of candidate, committee, or group**
- 2. Date of registration (or termination)**
- 3. Contact / committee officer / treasurer information:** Name(s), address, phone number, email address
- 4. Banking information:** Name of bank used, address

2. Information About Activity

There are four key elements of campaign finance that should be disclosed: who made a contribution or an expenditure, what was contributed or spent, whom the money (or other goods or services) went to, and what it was used for. These categories of information provide a basic account of money flows in the course of campaigns, whether the money is being spent by candidates running for office, PACs, or other groups.

What should be included:

- 1. Money coming in**
 - a. Who made the contribution:** Name and address of contributor (along with

employer and occupation if the contribution is above a certain threshold)

b. What kind of contribution was made (in-kind or monetary)

c. How much was contributed (or what was contributed, if a good or service)

d. Date of contribution

e. Any additional sources of income: List any loans including the details mentioned above (who made the loan, the amount of the loan, and the date the loan was made, along with any established repayment details).

2. Money going out

a. What the money was spent on / Who received the money: For independent expenditures, note whether the money was in support of or in opposition to a candidate or cause.

b. What kind of expenditure was made (in-kind or monetary)

c. How much was spent

d. Date of expenditure

e. Any additional expenses: List any refunds that are made along with the details mentioned above (who is being refunded, what is being refunded, when they are refunded, and the amount of the refund).

3. Overview

a. Total cash on hand: Include starting and ending balances for the reporting period

3. Context Information

Municipalities have a responsibility to share information about their campaign finance systems that adds context and clarifies questions about who has to register and file reports, when reports are due, and any contribution limits or prohibitions. These can help shine a light on what kind of information has to be reported and when, along with any information that might not be reported.

What should be included:

1. Thresholds for registration: Any monetary or other thresholds for requiring registration by candidates, committees, or other groups should be noted.

2. Filing requirements: Any thresholds for requiring reporting by candidates or committees should also be noted. (Some candidates who have registered are not required to file reports if they receive or spend less than a certain amount.)

3. Contribution limits or prohibitions: Any contribution limits or prohibitions on certain kinds of contributions should be noted.

4. Filing schedules: A schedule of when filings and any additional reports are due should be included.

II. How should this data be collected and shared?

Data about campaign finance, whether we're looking at registration forms or filed reports, should be collected and released in a way that lowers barriers to use and reuse -- not in a format that locks up the information and requires reformatting, license-struggles, and scraping before it can be analyzed. Many points of our [open data policy guidelines](#) apply to ideas for best practices governments can apply when collecting and releasing campaign finance data.

1. Require disclosed information to be posted on the Internet

The prevalence of technology and Internet access means any campaign finance information that is disclosed should also [be posted online](#). This provides the public access to important information without the time and cost of going to a government building to request records. It also saves government officials time by proactively posting information rather than delivering it on an as-requested basis.

Some local governments have created a [central portal](#) for campaign finance information. These portals can include anything from the ordinances overseeing campaign finance to databases of information from filed reports. These portals can also help ensure [permanent, lasting access](#) to the information and should come without restrictions on [accessing](#) and [reusing](#) the data. [Seattle](#), [New York City](#), and [Los Angeles](#) are just a few examples of cities with campaign finance disclosure portals.

2. Publish information as open, structured data

Publishing information in an [open format](#) simply means sharing it in a way that is machine-readable, or structured, and is easy to search and sort. This increases opportunities for the public to reuse the data. [San Jose](#), for example, releases its campaign finance data in searchable, sortable and downloadable lists. The interface allows users to choose the format for their data download, meaning the public has a variety of options for reusing campaign finance data.

3. Require electronic filing

[Electronic filing](#) is a requirement that makes campaign finance disclosure easier for everyone. It's easier for governments to collect data this way rather than reading handwritten forms and spending time putting that information into a computer (which can result in inaccuracies, too). It's easier for filers to have a consistent, online, easy-to-access interface for their required filings. It also makes it easier for the government to provide the data in an open, structured format to the public. [Oakland](#) is one example of a city that requires e-filing for campaign finance reports.

4. Release information in real-time

Public oversight of campaign finance activity would be further improved by releasing information [in real time](#). Releasing campaign finance information every quarter can leave long gaps of time in which the public does not know which interests are working to influence candidates or elected officials. Even monthly disclosure would be better than requiring only quarterly or semi-annual

reports as a way of keeping the public informed.

5. Publish bulk data

Allowing the public to download campaign finance data in bulk would help maximize the opportunities for finding narratives in the disclosures. [Bulk downloads](#) work with open, structured formats to allow for easy analysis and reuse of data.

6. Require the use of unique identifiers

Tracking the flow of money can be difficult even with detailed reporting requirements. Different donors may have similar names or the same donor's name might appear spelled several different ways in various reports, making it hard to know for sure who is who. Assigning [unique identifiers](#) to donors, candidates, PACs, and other groups would help insure the accuracy and traceability of data.

III. How does the government regulate this data?

How is campaign finance disclosure mandated and affected? One of the most common ways for cities to regulate campaign finance disclosure appears to be through city ordinances, but there are several other venues for affecting the disclosure of this information.

Ordinances:

- [Albuquerque](#) includes campaign finance regulations in its City Charter.
- [Oakland](#) has its campaign finance regulations in the city code covering elections.
- [Philadelphia](#) has city regulations that build on the state election code.

Campaign finance disclosure requirements could also be part of these policies:

- Public records law
- Ethics law
- Open data law
- Executive order
- Regulations change

On the role of states:

Some municipalities defer to state laws and regulations overseeing campaign finance. [Cambridge](#) is one such city that defers to state regulations and makes note of it on its website. This practice might be fairly common in [states where many of the local policies are set at the state level](#). The Federal Elections Commission has a [list of links to state disclosure offices](#) and the National Conference of State Legislatures has [resources on state campaign finance regulations](#) that can help shed more light on how municipalities might implement their own campaign finance disclosures based on state regulations.

IV. How can this data be useful?

There are many different examples of the impacts that releasing campaign finance data can have. Journalists and watchdogs across the country have contextualized campaign finance data in a way that gives citizens insight into the money that flows to different candidates or elected officials. Developers have also made applications and interfaces that let users sort through the data easily and do their own watchdog investigations.

1. Journalism examples

- AxisPhilly: "[The Money Maps: Tracing campaign \\$\\$\\$ given to Council!](#)"
- Columbia Missourian: "[St. Louis businessman Rex Sinquefield gives millions to Missouri campaigns](#)"
- Lowell Sun: "[Lowell City Councilor Nuon violated state campaign-finance law](#)"
- San Diego Union-Tribune: "[Follow money in San Diego mayor's race](#)"
- Star Tribune: "[Minneapolis mayor's race lags in disclosing campaign contributions](#)"
- WAMU: "[Major Campaign Donors Score Hefty City Subsidies](#)"

2. Examples of tech projects

- [AxisPhilly's The Money Maps](#)
- [The New York Times Campaign Finance API](#)
- [The Texas Tribune Campaign Finance Analyzer](#)

V. What other datasets add context to this data?

Campaign finance data can help provide context for other kinds of information. Knowing who is trying to help candidates win (or not win) public office, combined with data about how government officials act and where their interests lie, can help reveal a narrative of influence that may not otherwise initially be apparent. Some datasets that could be combined with well-structured, detailed campaign finance data include:

- Contracts
- Procurement
- Zoning
- Lobbying
- Grants
- Financial disclosures
- Economic interests
- Conflict of interest statements
- Revolving door
- Meeting agendas and minutes

There is one closely related dataset that this guidebook does not yet fully address: dark money.

Since the Supreme Court's [Citizens United decision](#) in 2010, the flow of unlimited spending on political activities has continued to increase. Outside groups that are not required to disclose their donors have played a growing role in elections on the national, state, and local levels. This is an [issue Sunlight follows closely](#), and we have [recommendations for a comprehensive disclosure plan in the wake of Citizens United](#) that are echoed in this guidebook.