

# The Washington Post

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## Sources of information and procedures to follow for identifying patterns of contributions to political campaigns

### Web sites:

It's a cliché to say that the Internet has revolutionized American life, but if there is one area in which the cliché is true, it is in research of this type. The old system of examining campaign contributions by hand or through the Federal Election Commission's electronic dial-up system worked reasonably well for years. Hand searches are still necessary for some types of research—such as how politicians spent their money. But for most, the old ways have proven much too slow and cumbersome for the kind of in-depth reporting and searching for patterns of campaign contributions news organizations conducted during last year's elections.

At The Washington Post last year, our computer-assisted reporting team downloaded the entire FEC database, which consists of five related files detailing contributions, candidates, committees, PAC money and other transactions. A computer program developed in the newsroom took the raw data, cleaned it up and allowed reporters to search more quickly for patterns, such as contributions made by employees of the same company or contemporaneously with certain fund-raising events.

Not every news organization needs to duplicate that effort. A variety of easily accessible websites now allows any reporter to do the same kinds of searches as the Post program—and in some cases, much more.

But beware—some websites are better than others.

The FEC's is the most basic ([www.fec.gov](http://www.fec.gov)), and it is useful for FEC getting press releases, including valuable ones that show party fundraising totals, hard and soft money, and lists of the top givers and receivers among presidential candidates, congressional candidates and PACs.

Some secretaries of states have their own campaign-finance websites. You can find links to all secretaries of state at <http://plains.uwyo.edu/~prospect/secstate.html>. California's, for example, is located at [www.ss.ca.gov](http://www.ss.ca.gov), and has summary campaign finance data, as well as a directory of lobbyists registered in the state. The state of Florida actually has individual contributor information on line. See [www.dos.state.fl.us/](http://www.dos.state.fl.us/). But this is still the wave of the future in many places.

Since many states are in the dark ages (on purpose) in disclosing information on contributors, some newspapers have started doing it themselves and posting the results on the web. The Post and several papers in Virginia have done just that. The Virginia Pilot has published some of their data on the web at [www.pilotonline.com/voter/](http://www.pilotonline.com/voter/). One of the best and most user-friendly campaign-finance websites is that of Tony Raymond, a former FEC employee. He has downloaded the agency's database, and designed a site that allows reporters to do a variety of basic and complex searches. It can be located at [www.tray.com/fecinfo](http://www.tray.com/fecinfo). For example, one can look for evidence of bundling by searching contributors according to place of business or occupation.

Unusual or unfamiliar company names should be examined to see whether multiple employees made contributions to the same candidate or candidates. The Kansas City Star, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post all had success with this technique last year in identifying bundled contributions to the Dole and Clinton campaigns by two small and little-known companies, a Pennsylvania landfill operation and a Massachusetts pool-toy manufacturer. (Of course, the list of givers from the same company is just the starting point for some good, old fashioned interviewing.)

Another way to find patterns, especially if you don't know who all the players are, is to look up the PAC of the interest group you're interested in. There you will find a list of the individuals who gave to the PAC, and their companies. You can then search to see who else they gave to and try to track them down for an interview.

The Center for Responsive Politics maintains a "sister site" ([www.crp.org](http://www.crp.org)) to the tray.com site. It, too, was designed by Raymond, and one can use it for basic FEC searches. But that's just the beginning. The CRP website also has lists of persons subpoenaed by congressional committees investigating the fund-raising practices of last year's elections, lists of ticket buyers to the 96 inaugural festivities, and even a way to search for people who spent the night in the Clinton White House or attended one of the many coffees sponsored for donors and would-be donors by the Democratic National Committee. It has even started scanning and putting congressional financial disclosure statements of members' personal assets—rather than campaign—assets on line. (So far, however, the scanned disclosure statements are not very readable.)

The Global Connections link on the CRP site allows reporters to search for lobbyists for foreign governments. Under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (FARA), such lobbyists must register with the Department of Justice,

which maintains its own separate website for FARA listings—at [www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fara/](http://www.usdoj.gov/criminal/fara/). Donor lists can thus be cross-referenced against the FARA registry to determine the extent to which lobbyists for foreign governments gave to a particular candidate or candidates. The FARA registry is available for 1995, with 1996 listings promised to be available soon.

An amendment in the FARA law now requires lobbyists for foreign companies to report with the Clerk of the House of Representatives (202-225-7000) and the Secretary of the Senate (202-224-2115). Neither database is now available on the Internet and must be searched in person.

A particularly useful research tool is CRP's Political Profiles database, where you will find a member's PAC contributions listed and sorted by industry. Many of us have done this kind of sorting in years past by hand, and it took forever. Now it takes just seconds.

Once you've got an interesting donor who's not familiar in your hometown or state, you can do some basic research even if you don't have bottomless data bases in your library or research center. The American Journalism Review at ([www.newslink.org](http://www.newslink.org)) has links to all the papers and magazines around the country that have websites. You can use those to check for recent mentions of the person who interests you.

And once you have found a pattern and identified the "culprit," it might be handy to look up the Office of Government Ethics website, for a check of the pertinent government ethics regulations. It's at [www.access.gpo.gov/usage](http://www.access.gpo.gov/usage).

Nearly everyone has a favorite search engine, and it would be folly to suggest one as the obvious choice for every reporter working in this area. But at The Post, our researchers have found a brand-new engine that some reporters may wish to try. It is called Inference.Find and is located at <http://www.inference.com/ifind/>. Inference Find can be used in conjunction with other search engines and conducts searches in a maximum of seven seconds. Our researchers have found that it does an amazing job of clustering sorting lists in dozens of different ways, removing duplicate hits. It was designed by the Inference Corporation [NASDAQ:INFR].

#### **Other sources:**

For any serious research on Washington-based lobbyists, the bible is a tome called "Washington Representatives." It is published Columbia Books, Inc., in Washington, D.C. and sells for about \$85. The Almanac of American PACs, published by Amword Publications, Inc., in Arlington, Va., is also a necessary research tool.

Both references can provide valuable leads on contributors and their backgrounds and can be useful in helping reporters make more sense of patterns of campaign contributions.

#### **Tips:**

It is generally known that television stations are required to maintain public files on political ads, including information on who paid for the ads. These are obvious sources that should be checked regularly. Less well known are the so-called "issue ads" that were used to such great effect in some states last year. These ads do not technically benefit a specific candidate, they can pull lots of votes when they're done right. TV stations do not have disclose information about issue ads, but many don't know that, and some are willing to provide the information, which can include the identity of the ad agency who put the ad together. If the agency is also working for the campaign or the same party the issue ads are working for, you've probably got a story.

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