



The 51st State

The State of Online

Tech Tools for the American Voter and the 2008 Congressional Elections

Democracy is not a spectator sport. ***IT'S AN ACTION GAME.***

So what do you want to know about your congressional representative or senator? Or even about representatives and senators out of your district or state? Pick up any newspaper (online or hardcopy) these days and you will find the presidential horse race dominating the daily headlines. Who's ahead? Who's behind? Who triumphed at the latest debate? Who tanked? Whose war chest brims over? Who's down to his or her last dime? ➡➡

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You would think that the presidential election is the only one that matters.



We know differently. We do have a president to elect — and we hope that the first article in this series (“The Presidential Campaign 2008: Candidates and News Sources” [http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/nov07/Gordon-Murnane_51stState.pdf]), which appeared in the November/December 2007 issue of *Searcher*, is helping you reach an informed voting decision. Nevertheless, we voters also have 435 representatives and 33 senators to elect come November 2008. And we know that the party that controls Congress can shape, endorse, or stymie any political agenda set by the president of the United States. President Bush enjoyed Republican support of both houses of Congress for the first 6 years of his presidency and most of his legislative agenda became law. When the Democrats took back the House and the Senate in the November 2006 elections, President Bush’s legislative agenda hit a road block. Even with the change in control of Congress in 2006, 94% of the incumbents for the House were returned, and 79% of the incumbents for the Senate were reelected. (See the set of charts from OpenSecrets.org that tracks reelection rates for the House and Senate from 1964: 2006 House [http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/reelect.asp?Cycle=2006&chamb=H]; Senate [http://www.opensecrets.org/bigpicture/reelect.asp?Cycle=2006&chamb=S].) Joshua Taberer’s GovTrack.us also provides a useful graphic that displays the incumbent advantage [http://www.govtrack.us/congress/repstats.xpd].

Compare those numbers with the current polls on congressional job approval and you might be surprised.

The Democratic sweep in the 2006 congressional by-election demonstrated the American public’s lack of regard for President Bush’s performance, but the public seemed even less impressed with the efforts of Congress. PollingReport.com provides a useful snapshot of congressional job approval ratings [http://www.pollingreport.com/CongJob.htm]. In all the major national polls (CBS, CBS-NYT, Fox Opinion Dynamics, Quinnipiac, L.A.

Times/Bloomberg, CNN/Opinion Research Corp, NPR, Gallup, AP-Ipsos, ABC/Washington Post), Congress polls consistently in the low 20s (see Figure 1 below).

There appears to be a big disconnect in the perceived quality of the work done in Congress — approval rates in the low 20s — and the rate of return for incumbents — House in the low 90 percents, Senate in the low 80s. Incumbents clearly have a tremendous advantage over challengers for one reason or another, but ultimately the responsibility for who we elect comes down to us — the voting public. As information professionals, we can help voters and potential voters learn as much as they can about the candidates running for office. This article will provide a how-to guide on finding information on congressional candidates for the upcoming 2008 elections.

So what do you want to know about the election? Are you registered to vote? If registered, where do you go to vote? Will you need some kind of ID? What kind of voting machines may your polling place have? What district are you in? Who is running for Congress in that district? Can you find some biographical background, information on credentials, or professional experience

See also: Congress.com	Survey Dates	Approve %	Disapprove %	Net Score	Approve minus Disapprove
Gallup	11/11-14/07	20	69	11	-49
AP-Ipsos	11/5-7/07	25	70	*	-45
NBC/Wall Street Journal	11/1-5/07	19	68	13	-49
ABC/Washington Post	10/29 - 11/1/07	20	65	7	-37
Quinnipiac Rv	10/23-29/07	21	70	10	-49
FOX/Opinion Dynamics Rv	10/23-24/07	25	54	22	-29
L.A. Times/Bloomberg Rv	10/19-22/07	22	69	9	-47
CBS	10/12-18/07	27	59	14	-32
CNN/Opinion Research Corp.	10/12-14/07	22	75	3	-53
Gallup	10/12-14/07	29	64	6	-35
FOX/Opinion Dynamics Rv	10/9-10/07	24	63	12	-39
NPR LV	10/4-6-7/07	25	69	6	-44
Gallup	10/4-7/07	23	71	8	-48
AP-Ipsos	10/1-3/07	22	73	*	-51
ABC/Washington Post	9/27-28/07	29	65	6	-36
FOX/Opinion Dynamics Rv	9/25-26/07	24	63	13	-39
CBS	9/14-16/07	27	66	8	-39
Gallup	9/14-16/07	24	71	5	-47
FOX/Opinion Dynamics Rv	9/11-12/07	32	56	11	-24
AP-Ipsos	9/10-12/07	26	71	*	-45
NBC/Wall Street Journal	9/7-10/07	23	65	12	-42
CBS/New York Times	9/4-6/07	23	66	11	-43
FOX/Opinion Dynamics Rv	8/21-22/07	24	60	17	-36
Pew	8/1-15/07	21	65	14	-44
Gallup	8/13-16/07	19	76	6	-56
Quinnipiac Rv	8/7-13/07	20	70	10	-50
CBS	8/8-12/07	25	63	12	-38
AP-Ipsos	8/6-6/07	25	72	*	-47
NBC/Wall Street Journal	7/27-30/07	24	63	13	-39
CBS/New York Times	7/20-22/07	26	61	13	-35

Figure 1. Check out the job approval ratings of members of Congress at PollingReport.com. This was accessed Nov. 16, 2007.

and expertise for the candidates? What kind of a job has the incumbent done? What hope from the challenger? What positions do your candidates take on the issues? How did the incumbent vote on legislation important to you, your family, and your community? What bills did your representative or senator sponsor or co-sponsor? Who contributed to your candidates' coffers? Who are their major fundraisers? What earmarks did they include in important legislation?

All of these questions can be answered thanks to the efforts of motivated and passionate organizations, groups, and individuals who truly believe in open, transparent, accessible, accountable, democratic government. Utilizing government data, along with other information, these organizations have created

impressive and easy-to-use tools, databases, mashups, and resources. This article will highlight and showcase the resources and tools that information professionals can use and share with patrons, students, colleagues, neighbors, and friends. The goal is to help all of us make informed, careful, thoughtful decisions on who can best represent us in the 2008 Congress.

Can I Vote?

To vote in the upcoming congressional and presidential elections, you must be registered to vote in your state. To check on your voter registration status, the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) [<http://www.nass.org/index.php>]

Competitive Races Around the Country

- ★ *Want to monitor competitive races around the country?*
- ★ *Want to find out which representative/senator received money from out-of-state donors?*
- ★ *Need to hear what the local press has to say about Representative X or Senator Y?*

The tools mentioned in this article allow us to keep track of our representatives and senators but also allow us to monitor competitive and important congressional races happening in other states.

The money race is particularly interesting. [OpenSecrets.org](http://www.opensecrets.org) provides a nifty way to monitor out-of-state money donations. You might be surprised at what you find. For example, Ted Stevens, senator from Alaska, has received almost 70% of his support from outside his state [<http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/geog.asp?CID=N00007997&cycle=2008>]. Representative John M. Dingell, representative for the 15th District of Michigan, received 57.6 % of his support from outside his district [<http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/geog.asp?CID=N00001783&cycle=2008>]. Candidates and incumbents are not limited to receiving money from constituents and local supporters. They can also receive money donations from around the country. You might want to ask yourself who the candidates are beholden to — the citizens of their state or district or to citizens scattered across the country who provided money to their campaign efforts? Or maybe you want to become one of those out-of-area contributors. Perhaps you want to affect a key election for any number of reasons.

The local press and local political blogosphere can reveal a great deal about congressional campaigns. Several tools — Politics1.com and Congresspedia — provide useful links to news outlets (newspapers, television, radio, and blogs) that cover the local political scene. Politics1.com lists news resources at the bottom of each state page [<http://www.politics1.com/states.htm>]. Congresspedia [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Portal:2008_U.S._Congressional_Elections] lists local blogs.

CQPolitics has compiled two really useful tools that monitor the Races to Watch for the Senate [<http://www.cqpolitics.com/wmspage.cfm?parm1=10>] and the House [<http://www.cqpolitics.com/wmspage.cfm?parm1=11>]. These tools are pretty useful if you want to monitor competitive seats, open seats, and the popular and well-known members of Congress. After all, the web not only provides information on candidates, it also provides a structure for donations.



Figure 2. The CanIVote website lets you make sure you're registered, find your polling place, and more.



Figure 3. The League of Women Voters created this site in 2006, where you can register to vote.



Figure 4. Politics1 provides updated news from across the country about presidential and congressional candidates.

option=com_wrapper&Itemid=205] has created a very useful website called Can I Vote [<http://www.canivote.org>] — a step-by-step guide on what you need to know to vote for the upcoming election. (See Figure 2.)

The guide provides seven steps, beginning with “Find Out If You’re Registered,” “Locate Your Polling Place,” “Know What Kind of ID Is Required,” “Save the Date” (including the dates for the primary or state caucuses as well as the national election), “Learn About the Candidates,” “Be a Poll Worker,” and “Vote.”

In 2006, the League of Women Voters (LWV) [<http://www.lwv.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=Home>] launched a website — Vote411.org [<http://www.vote411.org>] — to serve as a one-stop-shop for election information. (See Figure 3.)

The site allows you to register to vote as well as shows you how to locate your polling place; identification requirements; the kind of voting machines used; absentee voting options; and primary, caucus, and national election dates. The tool used to find polling place information on this site is particularly useful. Just type in your address and the system retrieves the location of the polling place. Both sites — CanIVote.org and Vote411.org — are helpful, well-organized, and designed to answer most questions about how to vote, where to vote, requirements for voting, and whom you need to contact if you have additional questions.

Who Are These People? Biographical Information

Internet resources can provide a wealth of biographical information about incumbents and challengers. Launched in 1997 by attorney Ron Gunzburger, Politics1.com [<http://www.politics1.com/index.htm>] is an absolute gold mine of information (see Figure 4). The site provides updated political news from around the country, including news about the presidential candidates, but the area devoted to the congressional candidates rocks. Click on the link to Federal/State Candidates [<http://www.politics1.com/states.htm>] and you will see a map of the U.S.

Click on any state and out pours a spate of information on state and congressional candidates, campaigns, elections, state parties, and local news sources.

I live in Maryland. Clicking on the state, I find a Candidate Directory Legend, Filing Deadlines, and the date of the upcoming primary. The next sections include State Constitutional Officers (complete with party affiliation, official state website, campaign website, and the date of the next state election) and the

More and More

All the articles in this series are available as free PDF files on the *Searcher* magazine collection at the infotoday.com website [http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/feb08/Gordon-Murnane_51stState.pdf]. However, something a little special has been planned for this article. A multimedia tutorial will walk through the process of studying up on candidates in the upcoming congressional elections. Go to online to the February Table of Contents to find the link [http://www.infotoday.com/searcher/feb08/Gordon-Murnane_51stStateTutorial.shtml]. The tutorial is divided into four parts: “Can I Vote,” biographical information on candidates, voting records for members of Congress, and fundraising and campaign finance activities. The tutorial shows how to find the information you seek to learn more about the voting process and the candidates.

Come walk with us! Bring your friends, colleagues, and clients!

VOTE

state legislature — House and Senate. The federal section includes information on your elected senators and house members. This section is truly a labor of love and inspiration. The site covers each congressional district, the current office holder, party affiliation, official websites, and campaign websites. It also carries a list of all the challengers with party affiliation, website, and brief description of their professional/political experience. And, by the way, democrats and republicans are not the only political parties in the state of Maryland. Politics1.com lists the alternative political parties along with links to their websites. It also links to the state board of elections. Lastly, Politics1.com provides a list of state news sources with their respective links. Really — a great collection of information at your finger tips.

Figure 5 shows Project VoteSmart [http://www.votesmart.org], a volunteer effort, dedicated to providing as comprehensive a picture as possible of the voting history, fundraising activities, public statements, biographical data, and interest group evaluations for all federal, state, and local candidates.

Project VoteSmart’s biographical information covers some 40,000 candidates and elected officials. Yes, you read that right — some 40,000 candidates. The site collects as much information as it can for every candidate who runs for president, congress, governor, or the state legislature nationwide. It also collects birth dates, educational backgrounds, family information, professional backgrounds, organizational memberships, political experience, committee assignments, web addresses, email addresses, capitol office contacts, district office contacts, and campaign office contacts [http://www.votesmart.org/bio_about.php]. Click on your state and you will see the current

officials (President, Congress, Governor, State Offices, and Current Candidates).

But Project VoteSmart does not stop there. It asks every candidate to fill out a National Political Awareness Test (NPAT). NPAT asks the candidates to share their positions on the issues. Check out your candidate at http://www.votesmart.org/official_five_categories.php?dist=npat.php. Did s/he willingly fill out the form? How many times was s/he asked to fill it out but didn’t?

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The screenshot shows the Project VoteSmart website. At the top, there are navigation tabs for 'CURRENT OFFICIALS', 'CURRENT CANDIDATES', 'POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE', 'POLITICAL ACTION PARTY', 'POLITICAL ACTION PARTY', and 'POLITICAL ACTION PARTY'. Below this, a large banner reads 'WE ARE HIRING FOR THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION'. To the right of the banner is a button that says 'Click Here to See the Project Vote Smart Logo'. Below the banner, there is a section titled 'What's New at PVS:' with a sub-section 'Presidential Political Courage Test Results'. This section contains text about the test and a link to 'Click Here to See the Project Vote Smart Logo'. At the bottom of the page, there is a section titled 'The Rubber Hits The Road'.

Figure 5. Project VoteSmart asks candidates to take a test and share their opinions on the issues important to voters.

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What position does your member of congress or senator hold on abortion, gun control, environmental issues, healthcare, immigration, national security, and Social Security? Here is your chance to find out.

Project VoteSmart also collects and displays performance evaluations from special interest groups. The ratings reflect how often members of Congress have voted with the organization's position on key legislation. Granted the special interest group has a particular viewpoint and bias, but that might help you in matching your own beliefs and views on issues with those of candidates. For example in 2006, Speaker Nancy Pelosi received a rating of 100% on labor issues from the American Federation of

State, County & Municipal Employees [http://www.votesmart.org/issue_rating_detail.php?r_id=3702]. In the same year, however, Pelosi received a rating of 0% from the Gun Owners of America [http://www.votesmart.org/issue_rating_detail.php?r_id=3606]. Click on the links for the organizations. Project VoteSmart provides a table of the ratings for every member of Congress and how well he or she supports the interests of the organization in that year. You can also learn a lot about your representative or senator by reading his or her public statements on key issues and topics. Project VoteSmart has put together full text of the public statements of members of Congress back to January 2006. Read for yourself what your representative or senator has had to say on your topic of interest.

Where else can you find biographical information on your representative or senator? Congresspedia, a joint project of the Sunlight Foundation and the Center for Media and Democracy, has put together the US Congressional Elections Portal [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Portal:2008_U.S._Congressional_Elections]. (See figure 6.)

This wiki portal provides profiles on candidates for Congress, coverage of the elections, lists of local blogs for each state, and articles written by citizen editors. Choose your state by clicking on the map of the U.S. You will see a list of the current members of Congress (House and Senate). Click on the individual member to see biographical information, money in politics, committees, affiliations, more background information, contact information, and links to the official House/Senate member website, as well as campaign site and a list of local blogs and discussion sites. This is all really useful information if you want to build a complete, compelling, and thoughtful picture of the candidate.

Run by graduate student Joshua Tauberer, GovTrack.us [<http://www.govtrack.us>] shows what someone who is passionately committed to transparency, accountability, and openness in government can accomplish. (See Figure 7.)

Tauberer has created a fabulous resource that tracks legislation, congressional committees, and members of Congress. Check out the section on members of Congress and congressional maps [<http://www.govtrack.us/Congress/findyourreps.xpd>]. Here you will see the marriage of congressional data with Google Maps. Find your representative by entering his or her name or clicking on your state. If you choose the state view, you will see a Google Map with congressional districts along with the current members of Congress. Click on your representative for a brief listing of biographical information (birthday, religion, etc.) and a link to his/her official website. The site also provides



Figure 6. Get candidate profiles on the Congresspedia portal, the US Congressional Portal.



Figure 7. GovTrack.us follows the accountability trail.

the member's committee assignments, congressional terms, voting history, and bill sponsorship and co-sponsorship of legislation. You can also review the speeches the member has made on the House or Senate floor in the 110th Congress. GovTrack.us is one site that you will use over and over.

Congressmerge [<http://Congressmerge.com>] can also help you find out information about your member of Congress and senator. Click on Find Who Represents You in Congress [<http://www.Congressmerge.com/onlinedb/index.htm>] to see a map of the U.S.

You can also use the search boxes by state, by address, city and state, or ZIP code. If I click on Texas, I am immediately told that the state has two senators and 32 representatives. From there, I can get contact phone and fax information. Click on the member to see a picture along with additional contact and personal biographical information, office staff members, committee memberships, and when he or she was elected to office.

The five sites that we have selected here — Politics1.com, VoteSmart.org, Congresspedia, GovTrack.us, and Congressmerge.com — all provide a range of information on each and every candidate (incumbent and challenger) running for the House and the Senate. Some dig down deeper into state elected officials. These organizations have done us a big favor by pulling this information together for citizens to review, evaluate, and use when making decisions about the upcoming elections.

Voting Records

Members of Congress are tasked with learning about the issues and crafting legislative solutions to problems and issues that affect every American. Learning how your representative or senator voted on key legislation is essential in helping you verify how well that member has represented your views and concerns. Several useful resources provide voting record information about each member of Congress. Project Votesmart.org, Congressmerge.com, GovTrack.us, and the Washingtonpost.com Votes Database all track congressional voting records.

Project VoteSmart [http://www.votesmart.org/official_five_categories.php?dist=voting_category.php] arranges the votes by topic/issue, by date, by bill title, and by how the member voted. How this site decides which votes to highlight and where the information has been obtained is provided in a detailed explanation [http://www.votesmart.org/voting_category_about.php]. Project VoteSmart provides a link to the bill, the sponsor, and statements made on the bill by the member. It has done a nice service by collecting key votes on specific topics.



Figure 8. Find out the voting records of the current House and Senate members who serve your state.

Congressmerge.com [<http://www.Congressmerge.com/onlinedb/index.htm>] provides voting histories for current representatives and senators. Click on your state and then the representative/senator and you will see a link to voting history. For each representative/senator, Congressmerge provides a link to the Roll Call Number from the Clerk of the House or the Secretary of the Senate, the date, the issue (bill number and link to the bill), the question (what is being voted on), the way representative/senator voted on the question, and the result (did the legislation pass or fail). Congressmerge provides a reverse chronological review with the most recent votes at the top of the page. Use it to track your representative or senator's complete voting history throughout the current session of Congress.

GovTrack.us [<http://www.govtrack.us/Congress/votes.xpd>] provides different ways to find information on voting records. You can review all the votes taken for House and Senate for the current session of Congress (110th), as well as votes for previous sessions of Congress dating back to 1993. The current session of Congress has voted on hundreds of bills, and you can see the Roll Call Number, the date of the vote, the legislation (title with link to the full text of the legislation), and the result of the vote complete with final tally. GovTrack.us also provides keyword terms, arranged by popular topic, major subject areas, or alphabetically [<http://www.govtrack.us/Congress/subjects.xpd>] to help you identify bills and legislation of interest to you. The search/browse feature allows you to refine your search with



Figure 9. Washingtonpost.com's Votes Database has the voting records of House and Senate members back to 1991.



Figure 10. OpenSecrets provides head-to-head comparisons of the candidates in every 2008 U.S. House and Senate race.

related keywords and terms. It also provides you with a list of related legislation, complete with the title of the bill, the bill number, link to the full text of the bill, and its status. Turn your search into an RSS feed and monitor a bill as it makes its way through the 110th session of Congress.

You can also learn about your representative/senator's voting record and history by searching by name or clicking on the Google Map of the U.S. My representative is Steny Hoyer from the 5th District in Maryland. GovTrack.us provides me with an interesting statistic ("Steny Hoyer missed 126 of 6831 votes (2%) since Jan 7, 1997 average relative to peers" [<http://www.govtrack.us/Congress/person.xpd?id=400189>]). In addition, Govtrack.us provides Hoyer's most recent votes, complete with the

date of the vote, the way he voted, the title, bill number, and links to the breakdown of totals and party breakdown, the votes of how other members of Congress voted on legislation state-by-state, and two nifty graphics on geographic voting patterns. The site also provides a link to all his votes and has set up an RSS feed for Steny Hoyer's future voting activities [<http://www.govtrack.us/Congress/votes.xpd?person=400189>]. I can also find which bills Hoyer sponsored or co-sponsored with links to all legislation (full text), co-sponsors, status, last action, which committee it was referred to, and related legislation. Govtrack.us is an absolutely terrific collection of data, all free and available to all.

Washingtonpost.com's Votes Database [http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress/?nid=roll_housesenvote] (see Figure 9) comprehensively covers House and Senate voting back to the 102nd Congress, providing multiple ways to find information for individual members as well as in the aggregate.

You can search for all members [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/house/members>] or by state [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/states>]. You can also see which representatives/senators have a perfect voting record [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/house/perfect-voters>], the ones identified as "missers" [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/house/vote-missers>], and party voting adherence [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/house/party-voters>], as well as participation in late-night votes [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/house/late-night>]. Want to see the margin of victory or loss for legislation? This database provides that as well. It also identifies key votes for bills and the bills most voted on [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/110/bills/most-voted-on>].

You can also use the site to see the annual financial disclosure reports [<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/Congress/disclosure-reports/2006/house>] that all House and Senate members must file with the Clerk of the House and the Secretary of the Senate. These reports describe the sources, types, and amounts of income House and Senate members earn.

The four tools listed here provide different ways to tackle the voting history of each member of Congress. Use them to slice and dice the information and display it in ways that make sense to you. Pretty nifty.

Campaign Finance

Running for office is expensive, very expensive. Challengers often find it difficult to unseat an incumbent precisely because

of the high cost involved. All candidates (incumbents and challengers) must file with the Federal Election Commission (FEC) and submit reports on who has contributed to whose campaign (individuals, corporations, labor unions, political action committees) and how much a candidate has spent on his or her run for office. The FEC makes those reports available online [http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/disclosure_data_search.shtml]. The FEC's Campaign Finance Disclosure Database offers different ways to find information. You can search by candidate and PAC (Political Action Committee)/Party Summaries [http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/srssea.shtml], individual contributors [http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/norindsea.shtml], committee contributors [http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/norcomsea.shtml], and candidate summaries [http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/norcanssea.shtml].

The Center for Responsive Politics has created one of the most important and valuable websites — OpenSecrets.org [http://www.opensecrets.org/index.asp].

If you want to learn about money in U.S. elections, start here. You will not be disappointed. You can find out information for your representative, senator, and challenger [http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/index.asp] by typing in his or her name. You can also browse lists of all members of Congress arranged alphabetically [http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/candlist.asp?Sort=N&Cong=110] or by state [http://www.opensecrets.org/politicians/candlist.asp?Sort=S&Cong=110]. Once you have chosen your representative/senator or challenger, the left-hand column displays a wealth of choices — total profile, geographic donations, contributions by economic sector (agribusiness, construction, defense, etc.), top industries, top contributors, expenditures, indirect expenditures, travel financed by special interests, and personal financial disclosures.

OpenSecrets also provides a head-to-head comparison of the candidates in every 2008 U.S. House and Senate race (see Figure 10 on page 38). The database allows you to compare candidates by the size and source of contributions, the industries and interest groups that support them, and a geographical analysis of where the money comes from [http://www.opensecrets.org/races/index.asp]. The site also lists the most expensive congressional races for 2008 [http://www.opensecrets.org/overview/topraces.asp].

If you are concerned about who is contributing to your representative/senator or challenger, then OpenSecrets.org is one site you must place on your political radar. The scope of information is truly impressive. It stands as a real testament to the commitment, dedication, and vision of the Center for Respon-

sive Politics to make politics in the U.S. transparent, accountable, and open. Just follow the money.

Bringing Home the Bacon

Now that you have found out who supports your representative/senator, you might also want to tie that knowledge to what legislation has been introduced affecting specific industries, organizations, and individuals. More and more attention is being paid to the practice of earmarks — a practice in which a representative/senator will insert spending provisions into a bill that directs taxpayer dollars to be spent on specific projects. It differs from a bill that appropriates money for spending by a specific government agency, in which the agency has the discretion as to where and how the money is spent [http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Earmarks]. Earmarking has grown in popularity during the last 30 years but recently has grabbed the attention of watchdog groups, including the Citizens Against Government Waste [http://www.cagw.org/site/PageServer?pagename=homepage], OMBWatch [http://www.ombwatch.org], The Sunlight Foundation [http://earmarkwatch.org], and the Taxpayers for Common Sense [http://www.taxpayer.net]. All these groups provide a healthy dose of sunshine on the earmarking practices of members of Congress. Citizens

Figure 11. Check out the Pig Book for the “pork barrel” projects that were stuffed into the 2007 federal budget.

Against Government Waste publishes the Pig Book [http://www.cagw.org/site/PageServer?pagename=reports_pigbook 2007], its annual “compilation of the pork-barrel projects in the federal budget” (see Figure 11 on page 39). You might have to dig a bit to use this resource, but you will find out which members of Congress introduced earmarks that targeted specific projects, who benefits from congressional largess, and the amount of money requested for each project.

Taxpayers for Commonsense has created a database of earmarks for this year’s congressional spending bills [http://www.taxpayer.net/budget/fy08appropschart.html]. The database for

each spending bill breaks down the exact amount of money requested, location of where the money is to be spent, purpose of the expenditure, and the member who made the request. By delving into the nitty-gritty, you can gain a compelling picture of the money appropriated by Congress and who benefits from congressional support.

The Sunlight Foundation and Taxpayers for Commonsense have created Earmark Watch.org [http://earmarkwatch.org], “a forum for citizen scrutiny and oversight of the thousands of earmarks inserted into federal spending measures” [http://earmarkwatch.org/faq]. Earmark Watch offers two important functions: to look at each recipient of congressional support by identifying its website and physical address, accessing “whether the recipient has lobbied Congress or whether its executives have donated money to federal election campaigns. Second, they can provide additional research and commentary on each earmark, to help determine the extent to which members of Congress earmark funds to meet important local needs in their districts or states.” The site analyzes earmarks in House bills that deal with defense and both House and Senate bills that deal with labor, health and human services, and education [http://earmarkwatch.org/2008-house-laborhhs and http://earmarkwatch.org/2008-senate-laborhhs]. Click on the name of your senator or representative and you will see what earmarks he or she has introduced and supported. This site brings home just how much money Congress spends on pet projects. An eye-opener for sure.

Launched in October 2006 by OMBWatch, Fedspending.org [http://www.fedspending.org] offers two important databases that reveal how federal monies are distributed via federal contracts and grants authorized by Congress.

OMBWatch.org believes that it is essential to know how the “government spends money so that citizens can hold elected officials accountable for the national priorities they set” [http://www.fedspending.org/aboutthissite.php]. What can you learn from this site? Plenty. Want to know the top 100 contracts for 2007 [http://www.fedspending.org/fpds/tables.php?tabtype=t2&subtype=t&year=2007]? No problem. The contracts database also provides federal contract awards by state [http://www.fedspending.org/fpds/tables.php?tabtype=t1&subtype=a&rowtype=c] and by contractor congressional district [http://www.fedspending.org/fpds/tables.php?tabtype=t1&subtype=at&rowtype=d]. FedSpending.org (see Figure 12 at left) dramatically paints a graphic picture of how much money your representative brings home to his or her district. It also gives you an idea of which companies receive federal monies in the form of



Figure 12. Find out how the government spends your hard-earned money at FedSpending.org.



Figure 13. Holding Congress accountable is the goal of TheMiddleClass.org.

contracts and grants. Match up the companies that receive this support and compare it to those companies that support members of Congress through campaign donations. You never know what you may find.

Aggregator Tools

Two sites have recently been launched to help voters and potential voters make it easier to find the information that has been highlighted so far. The Drum Major Institute for Public Policy (DMI) publishes an annual scorecard that analyzes domestic legislation and its impact on the middle class. Once a year, however, is not enough to really understand what Congress is voting on, so it has created a dynamic site, *TheMiddleClass.org*: Your Toolkit for Holding Congress Accountable, that “will update throughout the year as members of Congress vote on legislation of significance to the current and aspiring middle class” [<http://www.themiddleclass.org/about>].

What will you find on the site? DMI provides an analysis of pending bills that will have a “significant impact” on the middle class (either positive or negative). A description of the legislation, its status, online video on each bill, quotes from experts on the issue, and “hard-hitting numbers from DMI’s Injustice Index.” You can also see how your representative voted on the bill and search for legislation by issue area and keyword or for your representative/senator by name, state, or ZIP code. *TheMiddleClass.org* also assigns grades to each member of Congress based on how he or she voted. (See Figure 13 on page 40.)

Launched by Shelby Bonnie, the founder and former CEO of CNET, Political Base [<http://www.politicalbase.com>] (see Figure 14) is designed as a structured wiki to encourage discussion, participation, and research. Its focuses on elections at the local, state, and national level and is perfectly timed to coincide with the upcoming presidential and congressional elections. The site is organized into categories that relate and overlap with each other — such as money, people, issues, elections, government, and community. Take a look at the Money section. Click on the people tab at the top to find your representative or senator. You will find background information along with a link to a breakdown of monies donated to his/her campaign.

You will also find a chart of fundraising activities for the year, a graphic of the U.S. that highlights support by state, as well as a listing of monies by state and by metropolitan area. You might be surprised to see which states and metropolitan areas support



Figure 14. The Political Base wiki encourages discussion, participation, and research.

your representative or senator through campaign donations. The site offers another example of using technology to bring together information that would be difficult to find, organize, collate, and arrange to answer the kind of questions people have about their representative or senator.

Do Your Duty

All Americans have a civic responsibility to vote for the national, state, and local leaders who will make the decisions that affect us, our families, our community, and our nation now and well into the future. To vote responsibly requires that we learn about the candidates. In order to make informed, thoughtful, and careful decisions, use the growing and important resources, databases, mashups, and tools presented here. These resources can help you research the candidates, understand key positions and votes, and assist in making an informed decision on who you want to represent you in Washington. The sites provide a wealth of information that every American should review, study, and examine.

These tools have made it easier to find answers to important questions: How did my representative/senator vote on a specific bill? Who contributed to their campaign? What earmarks did they insert into that appropriations bill? Learn, share, participate, vote. And to all the groups, organizations, and individuals who have created these tools and made them available for free — well done and thank you. ■