Access Missouri
Using data to increase transparency in lawmaking

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Connecting the dots

Donation/Gift → Legislator → Vote

*Keep in mind that Missouri has a unique lack of limits for campaign contributions and lobbyist gifts*
What’s the problem?

- This information is public, but it’s all over the place
- Some data isn’t usable in its current format
- Can’t look at a legislator’s votes over time
- Takes too much time to discover the influence donations and gifts may have on a legislator’s vote
The solution

Access Missouri

- Lobbyist gifts
- Legislators
- Roll call votes
- Campaign contributions
- Legislative committees
Entity Relationship Diagram
Access MO website

- Informatics team put together a very basic user interface
- There is still a lot missing from the website, and the database isn’t completely accurate yet
Questions you’ll be able to answer

- What’s my state representative’s voting record on gun-related legislation?
- How do a state senator’s roll call votes correspond to the timing and source of lobbyist activity?
- How often does my Democratic state senator vote with/against the Democratic party?
Rep. Doug Funderburk, House Utilities Committee chairman

Details numerous lobbyist gifts received by Funderburk

Missing piece: how does Funderburk vote on utilities legislation?

Last year, we detailed how Dinin’ Doug and some of his pals used a certain bogus House committee (the Leadership for Missouri Issue Development Committee) to hide their penchant for good steak, accepting thousands of dollars in free meals at CC’s City Broiler paid for by lobbyists. By having the meals charged to a committee, none of their names show up in those pesky ethics reports. Turns out, we barely skimmed the surface.

According to Missouri Ethics Commission records, the House Utilities Committee had 23 different meals catered last year at a total cost of $17,201.

The majority of those meals were catered breakfasts at the Capitol during actual meetings when actual members of the public could watch the public’s business being done. Never mind that lawmakers could have bought their own breakfasts, spending a few bucks from the $104 they get each day in expense money; there is a handy cafe across from the House hearing rooms. But that’s not how things are done in the ethics-free zone that is the Missouri Capitol.
Interviews with reporters

Collin Reischman, *The Missouri Times*

“Right now, if you wanted to know how a representative has voted on all tax cuts or all gun bills, you’d have to search each bill individually on the House and Senate side and find how each bill was recorded.”

Called the labor intensity of looking at how legislators’ campaign contributions to each other may affect their likelihood of working on legislation together “ridiculously high”

Jason Hancock, *The Kansas City Star*

“There’s no way to go online to see how a committee voted on something. You have to go and get a physical roll call from the committee chairman’s legislative assistant. Committee hearings aren’t the most easily accessible information if you didn’t go yourself.”

Agreed it’s a lot of work to find how a legislator has voted on a topic, and then to connect it to lobbyist gifts; you would have to go through numerous donation filings on the MEC website.
Where did we find the data?
Missouri Ethics Commission

- Four tables:
  - Lobbyist gifts
  - Campaign contributions from PACs
  - Campaign contributions from individuals
  - PAC and campaign committee expenditures
Open States API

- Legislator bios
- Legislative committee membership
- Bill sponsorship
- Bill actions
Daily Journals

- Roll call votes
  - Third readings (final vote on a bill)
  - Amendments
  - Attendance

- Roll calls are in long PDF documents

- Finding key phrases for scraper

- “Billy the scraper”
This is a roll call vote in a Senate journal...

On motion of Senator Nieves, **SCS for SB 623** was read the 3rd time and passed by the following vote:

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Absent—Senators—None

Absent with leave—Senators—None

Vacancies—1
Records request (House)

- Chief Clerk Adam Crumbliss

- Roll call votes are automated in the House

- Crumbliss says database of roll call votes is working data, often incorrect

- Daily journals are the only reliable record of roll call votes
Records request (Senate)

- Jim Ertle from Senate research
- Maintains a SQL database of roll call votes that dates back to 2005
  - Not available online
- We obtained CSV files of Senate roll call votes from the Secretary of Senate office
How is a daily journal made?

- First, what happens in session is recorded on paper
- The staff uses “macros” within WordPerfect to compile journal
- The “macros” appear as series of prompts that ask you to fill in the blanks for certain information
- In the House, three staffers work on the journals
- In the Senate, one staff member is responsible for the daily journals
Shortfalls of ethics regulation in MO

- Issue committees
- Committee action is not tracked online
- If the donation is under $5,000, the date of donation is not reported
- Deep-pocketed donors can create non-profit groups to funnel money to lawmakers
- Donor-to-committee-to committee lending distorts the real picture

These shortfalls present opportunities for reporting...
Challenges

- Teaching informatics team about politics
- Inconsistencies in House journals led to difficulty in scraping PDFs
- Making daily data collection sustainable
- Obtaining historical data
What’s next for Access MO?

- Hire developer to complete the website
- Have a beta version of the website running before primary elections in August
- Eventually digitize older information that only exists on paper, thereby expanding research potential
- Make predictions