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## Google Government Gone Viral

A new government website brings more transparency to federal spending.

by John McCormack

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PORKBUSTING BLOGGERS AND muckraking journalists received an early Christmas present on December 13, when the White House Office of Management and Budget launched [USAspending.gov](http://USAspending.gov), an Internet search engine that makes information about federal contracts, grants, earmarks, and loans exceeding \$25,000 just a few mouse clicks away.

The website, mandated by legislation sponsored by senators Tom Coburn and Barack Obama in 2006, allows users to find out how much money federal agencies award to private contractors and grant recipients, and these allocations can be sorted by congressional district or state. Coburn said at a December 13 press conference that [USAspending.gov](http://USAspending.gov) is a more important tool than the Freedom of Information Act to "ensure our liberty" and "promote transparency in government." By simply going online and comparing campaign contributions and contracts awarded in each congressional district, reporters or bloggers might uncover evidence of Jack Abramoff-style scandals lurking in the federal budget.

Fiscal conservatives also see the website as a potential tool to cut fat from the budget--not only by placing the next "bridge to nowhere" or hippie museum on the chopping block, but also by encouraging greater competition for contracts and grants. How might this work? President of Americans for Tax Reform (ATR) Grover Norquist explains hypothetically that "if you can see it costs \$1 million to mow the lawn at the Pentagon, then the guys who mow the lawn at the Marriott can say, 'We'll do this for half.'"

Coburn hopes that the model of [USAspending.gov](http://USAspending.gov) will catch on in all 50 state governments "like wildfire"--and to a certain extent it already has. In 2007, Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, and Hawaii passed legislation to create online databases tracking state expenditures, and South Carolina and Missouri did so through executive orders, according to ATR. With a potent mix of bipartisan support at the grassroots and national level, the movement for what some have dubbed "Google government" is spreading fast--or "gone viral" as the bloggers might say.

Free market groups in Washington like Americans for Tax Reform have worked in concert with state legislators and the State Policy Network--a consortium of conservative and libertarian think tanks in 47 states--to get transparency efforts underway in 25 other states. Just as the movement made alliances on the national level between ideological opponents like Tom Coburn and Barack Obama, as well as Grover Norquist and Ralph Nader, so too has the transparency issue made for some unlikely bedfellows at the state level.

"Your allies are the people you'd least expect," says Bob Williams of Washington state's Evergreen Freedom Foundation. Williams was delighted to find editorial support for budget transparency from the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, whom Williams jokingly refers to as *Pravda*. "This is lazy-journalist-wins-a-Pulitzer legislation," says ATR's Norquist. "You can be a socialist and still be in favor of open government."

But behind closed doors, transparency efforts have faced opposition from self-interested bureaucrats and lawmakers who wish to keep the public eye from seeing the unseemly legislative sausage-making used to create federal and state budgets. The federal Coburn-Obama transparency legislation was nearly thwarted by prominent pork-barrel spenders, Alaska's Republican senator Ted Stevens and West Virginia Democrat Robert Byrd, who each placed a secret hold on the bill in an attempt to keep it from coming to a floor vote.

In Kansas, state representative Kasha Kelley says that opponents nearly defeated her transparency bill by keeping it stuck in committee and objecting that the website would cost \$50 million to implement--a spurious contention, considering that it only cost \$600,000 in software to create [USAspending.gov](http://USAspending.gov). Kelley says that on the last day of the legislative session, one of her allies dislodged the bill from committee, and it was originally defeated by a voice vote--only to be passed on a subsequent roll call vote.

Google government is even catching on at the local level. According to Mary Katherine Stout of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, at least 55 Texas school districts now publish their check registers online, meaning that even the smallest expenditures on items like pencils and paper are subject to public scrutiny. Norquist believes that "this will bring real democracy to school boards" by enabling school board candidates to say, "Here are the 25 checks that would not have been written if I were a member of the school board."

Many ailing school districts would benefit from the fresh air and sunlight provided by online budget transparency, perhaps none more so than Washington, D.C.'s chronically corrupt public schools. At Shaw Junior High School, after-school program employees Emerson Crawley and William R. Jones personally spent \$13,000 in student money on food, liquor, and entertainment--including \$372 at a strip club called Camelot Show Bar. The *Washington Post* reported dozens more instances of the good old fashioned graft that plagues the city's public schools, but D.C.'s city administrator Dan Tangherli says Mayor Adrian Fenty has no existing plans to put school expenses online. Tangherli notes, however, that the mayor is a fan of transparency initiatives and only assumed direct authority over the schools this summer.

Even though some of the money stolen from D.C.'s student funds came from federal grants, USAspending.gov would not have been able to detect theft of money stolen from grants that did not exceed the \$25,000 reporting threshold. Senator Coburn's spokesman Aaron Cooper says that "there is no need to lower the threshold because 95 percent of contract expenditures come from contracts above the \$25,000 threshold." But in an age when banks provide online bank statements, why should any public documents collect dust in filing cabinets when they could be online?

After all, Coburn is a fierce opponent of federal earmarks, which only make up 2 percent of all federal spending--and for good reason. Just as Rudy Giuliani's strategy of cracking down on petty crimes like littering and loitering helped reduce the incidence of more serious crimes, fighting even the smallest amount of corruption or wasteful spending might help to rein in the federal budget. As Giuliani said during a speech this fall, "The earmarks are the broken windows of the budget. They're signs of distress. They show a system that's not working. It's like graffiti on the wall of our spending culture."

While there is certainly room for improvement in transparency initiatives, the creation of USAspending.gov--and the spinoffs it inspired at the state and local level--is a dramatic improvement from the laborious process of skimming through 3,000-plus page federal budgets or submitting Freedom of Information Act requests for federal contracting information.

On December 13, Coburn gave credit to bloggers for helping to push the bill that mandated USAspending.gov through Congress, and he then called on his fellow citizens to be vigilant in their endeavor to hold elected officials accountable, quoting the words of Thomas Jefferson: "We might hope to see the finances of the Union as clear and intelligible as a merchant's books, so that every member of Congress and every man of any mind in the Union should be able to comprehend them, to investigate abuses, and consequently to control them."

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