

Follow the Money

A Beginner's Guide to Tracking Political Donations

You do not need to be a journalist, lawyer, or forensic accountant to follow political money. The tools exist. The data is public. You need about thirty minutes and a search engine. This guide shows you how.

Step 1: Find Your Representative's Donors

Go to [OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org). Search your representative's name.

- Click 'Money' to see their top donors and donor industries.
- Look at 'Top Industries' — these tell you who this person works for.
- Look at 'Outside Spending' — money spent ON their behalf, not just donated to them.
- Compare their voting record to their donor list. Patterns emerge quickly.

Step 2: Track a Specific Bill

Go to [congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov). Find the bill. Then:

- Note which industry the bill affects.
- Look up who voted for it on OpenSecrets.
- Check which of those members received donations from that industry.
- Check the timing: Did donations spike before or after the vote?

Step 3: Track Federal Contracts

Go to [USASpending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov). You can search by agency, contractor, congressional district, or time period. Look for:

- Contracts awarded to companies that donated to the awarding official.
- No-bid or sole-source contracts — these bypass competitive bidding.
- Contracts to companies with no prior government work.
- Contracts that were renewed or expanded without new competition.

Step 4: Follow the Revolving Door

OpenSecrets.org has a Revolving Door database. Search for officials who moved between government and private industry. Ask:

- Did they regulate the industry they now work for?
- Did they vote for legislation that benefited the company that now employs them?
- How quickly did they take the private sector job after leaving government?

Step 5: Read the Financial Disclosures

Federal officials are required to file annual financial disclosures. These list their investments, income, and potential conflicts of interest. Find them at efds.usdoj.gov for executive branch officials and disclosures.house.gov for House members.

Look for: Stock holdings in industries they regulate. Income from companies that have business before their committee. Investments that increased after policy decisions they were involved in.

Key Resources: [OpenSecrets.org](https://www.opensecrets.org) | [USASpending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov) | [Congress.gov](https://www.congress.gov) | [FollowTheMoney.org](https://www.followthemoney.org) | [ProPublica Nonprofit Explorer](https://www.propublica.org)