

Voter Guide 2014: Data Transparency

National Priorities Project examines issues related to the federal budget in time for the 2014 election.

Disappearing Federal Data

Government services like clean water, education, and security are provided through an extensive system of contracts and grants to states and to local businesses and nonprofits, as well as by federal employees who live and work in every state. Americans have a right to know how their federal tax dollars are being spent, from who's getting federal contracts – and for what – to where federal employees work and what they're being paid.

To meet this need, in 1983, the U.S. government began publishing a complete report of federal spending in every state, county, and congressional district, called the Consolidated Federal Funds Report (CFFR). In 2012, it stopped.

Shortly after President Obama took office, he promised an “unprecedented level of openness in Government.” Since then, federal agencies have been busy publishing data. USASpending.gov is now the website designed to show the public how their federal tax dollars are spent each year. But USASpending data is fraught with omissions and inconsistencies. In addition, the site excludes entire categories of spending entirely, notably federal salaries and benefits. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) recently reported that for fiscal year 2012:

- Nearly \$619 billion of assistance award money was underreported in USASpending.
- Only between two and seven percent of awards listed in USASpending are consistent with agencies' own records.
- USASpending was missing spending information completely for 342 federal programs.¹

Watchdogging Open Data

Despite the tremendous amount of federal data that's been released in the last few years, there's much work to be done. Citizens have a right to know what the government has chosen not to publish, and they have a right to be confident that government-published data are accurate.

The DATA Act

Earlier this year, President Obama signed the Digital Accountability and Transparency Act (DATA Act) into law. This legislation requires that agencies and recipients of federal money follow standardized reporting procedures. It also stipulates that budget appropriations and detailed information about Treasury accounts be added to USASpending.

What does all this mean? The goal is that the public will have greater insight into how the federal budget translates to spending on specific federal programs.

Unfortunately, the DATA Act does not mandate improvements for the grant and contract data already in USASpending, and it doesn't require that any of the new data be localized. In other words, it doesn't replace the federal spending data by state, county, and congressional district that the government used to provide in the CFFR.

Regardless, the DATA Act is an important step toward transparency, but its successful implementation will be challenging. With many of the milestones years away, we'll need leadership from the agencies and commitment from the next administration to ensure its success.

What to Ask Your Congressional Candidate

- What measures do you support to ensure that the public can see how their tax dollars are spent in their states and communities?
- What steps can lawmakers take to ensure that budget, spending, and tax data published by the federal government are accurate?

More about Transparency and Data: bit.ly/NPPtransparency

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, [Oversight Needed to Address Underreporting and Inconsistencies of Federal Award Website](#).