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Put Maryland Government Spending on the Web

by Trevor Bothwell

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Although the GOP's humiliating defeat in 2006 was due to an accumulation of voter concerns, none was likely as significant as Americans' collective impression that Republicans abused their congressional majority, ultimately trading the concerns of their constituents for pork-barrel spending, cronyism, and corruption.

Unfortunately, this reality is not specific to one particular party and is all too common when we lack a divided government, where a system of checks and balances at least modestly prevents politicians from acquiring unilateral authority.

On the bright side, however, perhaps it was the voters' reaction to this perceived abuse of authority that provided the impetus for Congress to pass one very important bill last year: the Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act, which creates a user-friendly, Google-like database to enable taxpayers to track most federal spending.

Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla., and Sen. Barack Obama, D-Ill., sponsored the bill at the federal level, but why stop in Washington, D.C.? Certainly Maryland taxpayers deserve spending transparency in Annapolis, too.

Perhaps no state would benefit more from greater scrutiny of its politicians than Maryland, which has now returned to one-party Democratic rule with the election of Gov. Martin O'Malley, thus increasing the propensity for lawmaking that promotes unconstrained and politically-inspired spending.

Moreover, Maryland has a history of shady government dealings, so it is all the more important that the General Assembly in Annapolis

approve and O'Malley sign legislation establishing a Coburn-Obama Internet spending database for Maryland.

The Maryland Department of Budget and Management maintains an online database of the state budget but it merely itemizes spending by general categories such as school district,

general services, and grants and subsidies. Nowhere is information available as to who's getting, say, taxpayer-subsidized grants to individuals or businesses or other corporate welfare handouts.

Marylanders should have a Web-based tool allowing them to perform searches by state senator, delegate, county, agency, institution, or business to track those either dispensing or receiving taxpayer revenue.

Though it may not eliminate waste, such a tool would at least cast sunlight on spending and make one idea very clear: If our money is good enough for Maryland to spend, it's good enough to have a paper trail.

As the 110th Congress formally convened, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi promised that Democrats would lead the most ethical and open Congress in history. Clearly that remains to be seen.

But considering their widespread electoral success was due in part to the GOP's ethical shortcomings, one would imagine Maryland Democrats could ride this momentum and pay very little political price for implementing their own spending transparency policy.

Interestingly, Maryland Democrats rightly pressured Republican Bob Ehrlich to operate a transparent government while he inhabited the governor's mansion during the past four years.

With their resumption of power, now is the ideal time for them to work with O'Malley and their Republican counterparts to put transparency principles into practice, and to prove that such a call to action was more than simplistic partisan bickering or empty campaign rhetoric.

All politicians will not welcome this increased scrutiny. But if they want our money, they should at least welcome our oversight. Key to that oversight is putting in place a user-friendly, easily searchable, up-to-date database that allows Maryland taxpayers to readily track how the government is spending their money.

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