

Speaker 1 (00:00):

Right, everybody. Ooh, that was odd. Uh, welcome again to Polus 2024. We're gonna get started with this session. Intro to Digital Democracy. Knew that you all have probably been in several sessions. Thank you for joining us here today. As a reminder, we are a nonprofit investigative news organization made possible by the generosity of our sponsors and community members. So thank you for that. I wanna give a recognition to those sponsors Right now, a special thanks to the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of San Diego for being our partner for a seventh year. Our thanks to the Saquon Ban of the Kumeyaay Nation, the United Domestic Workers Union, A A RP, the San Diego Foundation Business for Good KY Development, the San Diego Municipal Employees Association, the Asian Business Association, Planned Parenthood of the Pacific Southwest Atlantis Group, San Diego Art Matters, and the Southern California Rental Housing Association.

Speaker 1 (01:01):

We'd also like to recognize KPBS and I News Source are partners and public matters. We are partnering to share our content conversation and events like Polus to ensure all San Diegos understand their opportunity to participate in the democratic process, and that it means more than voting in an election. A couple of housekeeping things, if you have questions that you would like to ask. We have a bowl with pens and note cards back there. I will be, uh, collecting them throughout the session as well. And without, uh, further todo, I would like to introduce Ryan Salo, the Digital Democracy Reporter from Cal Matters.

Speaker 2 (01:42):

Well, thank you very much. Um, I just wanna tell you a little bit about Cal Matters. So we are a non-profit and, uh, non-profit nonpartisan newsroom based up in Sacramento. Uh, we've been around for about 10 years. They started off with two people now. It's, uh, what close to a hundred. And, uh, we cover all the major policy issues in California. And, um, we share our work with the, uh, on all the wires we share with tv, radio, do a lot of that kind of thing. Um, so I'm a long time journalist. Uh, I've been a reporter for about 18 years. Um, I've written about my share of bills over the years, but this is my first time, uh, I've ever covered the legislature as a beat. And I was hired for this job, not really knowing what I was going into. Um, basically I've, I've, I've, Dave Lescher said, Hey, would you like to come use this really cool new tool? It's an AI backed system called Digital Democracy to help keep our, our legislature more accountable. And I was like, okay. I, I was <laugh>. I really wanted that job. I, I really wanted to work at Cal Matters. I really didn't know what I was getting into. And I, it, what has turned out to be, has been this amazing reporting tool that has really, uh, can make anybody a, a journalist. Um, and it's all using AI on this in the system to keep track of. Can we go to the next slide?

Speaker 2 (03:08):

So basically, for the first time, every word spoken in the California legislature is, is now in a database. Every dollar that's been spent on, on politics in California is in a database. And every Vote cast is now in this database. And it's all searchable. And, um, I'm, I'm not kidding when I say I was really, really excited about using AI to hold, uh, our elected leaders accountable. Um, and it's super cool for me personally as a reporter to be, uh, working in real time doing basically the using technology that's gonna be the future of journalism. So we, so what are we doing with the database? We're, what we're trying to do is train an AI to look for things in, in, in, and anomalies and things like that. And what, what we wanna do is to use it to, so this is where we get all of our data.

Speaker 2 (04:00):

So basically, um, if you're a lobbyist, you have to report to the Secretary of State. If you give a campaign donation that has to get go routed through the Secretary of State, that's all in a database somewhere, <laugh> very hard. If you look at the website, it's from like 1992. Um, and it's really hard to try to

navigate. Um, you also have, every hearing is televised in the legislature, um, but it's not transcribed. Um, and you, in order to follow a bill, you'd have to go in there, you'd have to either know when the bill was taking place, watch it that way. You'd have to go to the hearing if you, if you're actually there, or you in, in the case of trying to find a video or trying to find a specific bill in a four hour hearing, uh, <laugh>, it's very difficult. You so imagine everybody's pulled up in a YouTube video, right?

Speaker 2 ([04:47](#)):

Have you tried to find like a long YouTube video that's super long and you're only interested in one little section of that video? And that I, how you had to scroll through to find that? Well, that was basically like trying to find a single bill discussion in maybe a two or three hour hearing. Um, and then every vote cast, every, um, every piece of legislation is on this other website. And so what we did was we took all of those different pieces of information and stuck 'em all together into a searchable database. And so the idea behind this was we wanna give people a tool to be able to, um, keep tabs on their local lawmaker, be able to follow issues, um, that they care about. And we wanted to give journalists the ability to, um, a shrinking press corps that's been through a, a major challenge over the last, uh, quarter century as their, as, as reporting, uh, staff has shrunk to help them be able to cover, uh, pol state politics.

Speaker 2 ([05:48](#)):

And so why is this important? Um, well, as you know, um, I would argue that having a two thirds majority of any party controlling a legislature creates, uh, a, you remove a, a key check in the process when you have, uh, uh, two, two parties that are able to kind of check each other's impulses. And in California right now, we have a two thirds majority that's very rigid. Every single lawmaker, um, on the state level is a, is a democrat. And I, I would argue that what this does is it, um, it, it creates a system that's less likely to be transparent, uh, because they're all friends with each other and there's nobody in there really checking, um, sort of their, you know, the, but their worst impulses, if you will. Um, and, um, the, at the same time that that has been going on, we've had fewer reporters covering the legislature, being the eyes and ears for the public.

Speaker 2 ([06:45](#)):

Um, you know, used to have these, every major newspaper had its own, um, uh, capital press corps that would, uh, keep tabs on on the government. And even, like, I'll, even small papers, I'll, I'll give you an example. The Stockton record used to have a capital reporter. He was a friend of mine. Um, they ended up killing that position probably 15 years ago. Um, and so, um, what this does is we wanna be able to have e help journalists, but also help everyday members of the public, uh, be able to keep tabs on these folks. And just, so to kind of give you a sense of just how prolific of a place this is, I looked into our database this year, um, or just today to kind of see where we're at. And, um, there were 2 2500 plus bills introduced this year, or this two year session.

Speaker 2 ([07:36](#)):

A thousand of them. More than a thousand of them were actually sent to the governor's office. So, and there are 120 lawmakers each, uh, casting gobs and gobs of votes each year. Okay? The average lawmaker, according to the data this morning, voted nearly 3000 times last year. Um, if you tell, if you total all 180 of these folks up, that's there, there were over 300,000 or close to 300,000 votes cast in the legislature last year. Um, and each of, not all of those votes represented significant impacts, but a significant number of them did. And, and as, as these different groups are trying to get their way in the legislature, they're spending millions and millions of dollars trying to influence politics. Um, and each of these decisions could potentially impact up to 40 million people in California, right? Um, we're the fifth largest economy in the world.

Speaker 2 ([08:31](#)):

So the decisions that make that are made here, um, are really important as, and as we mentioned, I argue that this process has become a lot more opaque. Lawmakers are doing a lot more things in secret. Um, and what what's been really remarkable for us is we can actually use the data to show how that is happening and how, um, so much of this process is happening as rubber stamps of deals that are happening behind closed doors. Uh, next slide, please. And so, uh, to just kind of get into the, the basics of it, um, we've been building this tool for the last year and a half, um, through a wonderful co collaboration with Cal Matters, uh, Cal Poly and a website design company called Ted Up. Um, our primary funding sources, which we always gotta mention, is from Arnold Ventures and Knight Foundation. Uh, but we thank them very much for that. All right. And, um, um, so I think we could probably, since we're kind of crunched for time, let's just switch over to the main, uh, to the site here, if that's okay.

Speaker 2 ([09:37](#)):

All right. So this is digital democracy. So basically, this is the forward facing site that we, um, uh, that we built with the idea that, all right, you're probably, as, as somebody who's, uh, coming to the site, you're probably coming to go check out a lawmaker or maybe you're particularly passionate about an issue. So, but first, let, let me, uh, let me actually show you something. This is always fun to do. So this is a search database for the first time you can actually search the law, uh, for keywords and search for bill numbers and search everything. And it's kind of fun to just see, like you could type in cow matters and see how often cow matters is actually spoken in the legislature. Here you have it. Here, you have a lawmaker who's actually talking about it. Let's see if I can get it to play. Can we get some audio? Cow

Speaker 3 ([10:30](#)):

Matters is making the point if this bill runs the risk of favoring.

Speaker 2 ([10:35](#)):

All right, so just imagine. So this hearing, how many, um, how many hearings were discussed, or how many bills were discussed in this hearing, uh, I can't tell. Um, but just imagine trying to find that one quote in a four hour video, a YouTube video, and that's basically what it used to be like, trying to find information in the legislature, and you couldn't search it. So, so we figured that people would wanna come in and be able to take a look at this, um, based on topic. And so here's a say you came into the site and you wanted to look at, uh, education is your passion. So what we did was we curated some of the top stories, um, or the, some of the stop top issues that the, we, we feel like, uh, our, our reporters, I say we, um, felt were the most important bills that were being discussed.

Speaker 2 ([11:25](#)):

Um, every bill that was flagged as an education bill, um, is, is in progress. There. You can see 'em all, you can click on 'em. We, we identified key players in the process, including all the top lawmakers, um, that we felt were in there. And this, this is my favorite part of this, is we actually had the AI identify who were the most prolific position takers, if you will, on, or speakers on particular pieces of legislation. And it tracks really, I, I don't, I don't cover education that much, so I don't know who hop, skip, drive is, but all of the rest of these are very much, um, involved in the, uh, education process and it tracks really well. And so, um, the other thing is, is all right, so you've got, if, if you come in wanting to look at your individual lawmaker, you can, or just who are the lawmakers in general.

Speaker 2 ([12:21](#)):

I mean, you can sort by, it's always fun just to kind of show you how outnumbered Republicans are. Um, particularly in the Senate. You see just how few of them there are compared to everybody else. Um, you

can search by sexual orientation, you could search by whether they were at born in this country or not. Um, you can search by race, ethnicity, gender. We wanted to give people kind of a snapshot of who are these 120 people. Um, the, the AI also does some really fun stuff for us where it keeps track of, I'll show you like, who are the most talkative lawmakers. This is really fun. Um, and you could see who actually is the biggest blabber mouth in the legislature. And I wouldn't really, I think, uh, Jim Woods kind of a anomaly on this one because he heads, um, he's the, he's basically the second in command in the Senate, runs the senate the whole time.

Speaker 2 ([13:16](#)):

So he is always talking, introducing bills and things like that. But the rest of these people are definitely, um, very chatty, chatty folks. Um, you can also see, uh, you know, how much who, who kind of led the league and, uh, um, how much, uh, lobbyists paid for them to go on trips, how much lobbyists gave them gifts, um, you know, that kind of stuff. And then we have just sort of like explainers on the site. But this, I mean, that's stuff you could find probably, well not the AI stuff, but the, um, okay, hold on a second. Stupid max. All right, let's look up a lawmaker. Let's look up Jim Wood.

Speaker 2 ([14:00](#)):

All right, there he is. All right. So this is the speaker pro tem of the assembly. He's the second in command. Um, and so what we, what we've got is every story where that we wrote, where we met, we mentioned Jim Wood is up at the top here. We've got a bio describing where he is at, um, or where he was. I had to write a hundred, 20, 120 bios of these lawmakers. I'll have, you know, that that was a very tedious process. Um, just throwing that out there to so that people are aware. Um, you could see where he aligned logically, um, based on some sort of fancy political science formula that they plug in there. And you could see how many bills he introduced, how many failed, how many passed, and you could kinda see who, uh, we wanted to tag people based on their leadership roles.

Speaker 2 ([14:50](#)):

Um, he's a, uh, you know, he is the speaker pro tem second in command. He is also in charge, I believe, of a very powerful healthcare committee. And this is my favorite part of the lawmaker profile, uh, uh, page. One of the things, it's like, who are these people? One of the ways they see is how often do they align? Do their votes align with the position that was taken in, uh, by various groups? And so for the first time, we have, every time somebody say, you're a lobbyist for Chevron, and you testify at a hearing, say, I oppose this bill. The AI now tracks that. And we also have every time that these positions are mentioned in a bill analysis, uh, where, where that's where if you write a formal letter as an organization and say this, um, we, we oppose or we support this bill.

Speaker 2 ([15:40](#)):

Now the AI has it all in one place. And what that allows us to do is actually to quantify how often do lawmakers actually, um, cast votes in accordance with certain groups positions? So let's look up Pacific Gas and Electric Company. So we can see here that Jim Wood has had 39 opportunities since 2015 to vote on a bill that, uh, pg and e has taken a position on, whether that's for or against. And he has been aligned with that, their positions 54% of the time. Let's do SEIU, the emit prominent labor union. So this is a very, a very good way of being able to kind of flesh out how a lawmakers kind of, how their, how their votes and who they align with. So he's aligned with this union in over 300 votes 96% of the time. Let's look at a more, uh, uh, conservative Howard Jarvis.

Speaker 2 ([16:38](#)):

So Howard Jarvis is sort of like the tax spider organization in California. Um, he's only aligned with, uh, Jarvis 30% of the time. So I find that fascinating 'cause you could actually quantify kind of who, who

people are based on their votes and who they align with. Um, you could, we also, a lot of that shows up in the money. We have every dollar spent in state politics. So you could actually see here you go here, you've got Jim is a, uh, he's a, got received about what a quarter of his, uh, campaign war chest over the years has been from labor health, which makes sense 'cause he's a former dentist and he sits on health committees. Um, he's received a bunch of money from healthcare industries finance, and then you have all the other little guys down here. And so, yeah, we also include every, uh, in terms of other money, um, we, in turn, we have all the gifts sponsored travel and behest on here.

Speaker 2 ([17:35](#)):

Um, so you're aware behest are, when a lawmaker ask, uh, a lobbying organization to donate to a particular cause that they support. Um, and this one kind of jumped out at me this morning when I looked at this. Um, so the only behest we have in the, on the record was a, um, VSP is a, uh, health insurer for that does vision health stuff, um, donated, uh, more than a quarter million dollars to some cause that, uh, Dr. Wood wanted. And, um, so one of the things that makes behest interesting is that, um, uh, it has to happen here or there where lawmakers ask to get around campaign contribution limits, um, uh, and also to perhaps put some money in their own pocket, um, have asked organizations to donate money to causes that they have a financial stake yet. Um, it's happened to several times where lawmakers wives or husbands sat on boards or were members or paid staffers of nonprofits, they all of a sudden got a giant endowment from somebody.

Speaker 2 ([18:43](#)):

It's some giant behest from somebody. We can see every bill that Jim Wood has introduced, um, we can see what committee he's on. We can also see how, um, different interest groups rate him. Um, as you know, very much a liberal lawmaker, um, and very much not a big, uh, the conservative groups are not a big fan. And this is, it's kind of where the bread and butter of where digital democracy, uh, is. Um, you can actually, now, every time Jim Wood, um, testifies at a hearing or speaks at a hearing, you could actually click and go directly to that, which is absolutely mind blowing. <laugh>, let's play this.

Speaker 4 ([19:28](#)):

Sure. I'm gonna, I know we don't usually do long presentations in a concurrence 10

Speaker 2 ([19:34](#)):

Minutes. So anyway, you can actually go directly there. And so what Bill is this? I don't know. Let's take a look. So you could actually pop this up. So this is a bill about, uh, seismic safety in, uh, uh, rural, uh, California, uh, hospitals. Um, and you can go in, you can see what, uh, you can see the summary of the bill. The bill texts the status. So this has been, it's awaiting the governor's signature. I don't know if he signed it yet. Um, there's usually a slight delay in it. Um, getting, um, signings getting posted. You could see exactly how everybody voted. So these were pretty overwhelming bills. Um, overwhelming support bills. You could see the supporters and opponents, and you can read the actual analyses as the bill made its way through each committee hearing. Um, and what I like about it right here, you can actually see how the bill had changed.

Speaker 2 ([20:31](#)):

So you can go through and see, I mean, one of the shady things that the law that the legislature does is they'll often just gut a bill at the very last minute and insert a bunch of texts for a different bill and then pass it through with minimal discussion and debate. In fact, I just did a story using the database on that, just not that long ago. Just published just this week. Um, all right. And then let's go to just some, this is the other stuff that's really cool. So let's look at SEIU, that union we talked about, or organizations. All right. So you can click on SEIU and you can actually see, so every bill has its own page. Every person has

its own page, and every organization now has its own page. You can actually see these are all the different lobbyists and advocates who said that they were part of SEIU.

Speaker 2 ([21:25](#)):

You can see what bills they've formally taken positions on. Um, you can also see, yep. So you can see that they were for and against these bills. Um, just to give you an example, 'cause I wanna show you a good bill that has some, uh, so you could actually see this bill barely passed. This is a Jim Wood bill. Um, in, in the Senate you need 41 bills, uh, votes to pass. Um, you had 14 people who voted against it, most of them Republicans, but there was one doctor, um, who voted for this or voted against this. She's a democrat. And then you have, these are also very telling these non votes, these no votes down here. So under California's legislative rules, you can vote, you, you can vote yes, you can vote no, or you could just stay silent during the roll call. Um, and this is a big deal because it allows, and it counts the same as voting.

Speaker 2 ([22:26](#)):

No. So all these people who didn't vote right here, that counts the same as a no vote, but they didn't actually have to attach their name to it. And what I love about this new system is that we keep track of that. Now, we've written several stories about this cowardly way that they can get away with not actually casting a a no vote. Um, and then the financials are really important. I'd like to have it make this number a little bit bigger, but, um, just 'cause it kind of gets buried here in the chatter. But this is how much money that, uh, labor Union has given to de uh, to politicians since 2015. They've given 18, um, 18 million bucks. Um, and you can actually type in and see just who they gave money to. Um, so, and yeah, you can also pull up and just see what, where did they actually testify in support or against a bill?

Speaker 2 ([23:19](#)):

And, uh, where are we at on time here? Okay. All right. So that's the public, that's kind of the roundup of the public facing digital democracy page. Um, what we also did, um, to try to help reporters be able to cover their legislators, um, and to be able to get more coverage of the State House. The other thing that we built is we've trained the AI to generate news tips for reporters. And, um, the way it works is we have all this data. We have tons and tons of data we have. Um, and just imagine, uh, how, how, if you were a reporter, that's kind of how, that's how we've been thinking about it. And you could re create a program that would flag things that would put potential interest to you. So say somebody votes somebody was the lone Democrat to vote no on a bill in a Democratic super majority that we should probably flag that, that just didn't, that could just be a really interesting story about why this person did this.

Speaker 2 ([24:21](#)):

Um, somebody voted against a major donor, somebody got a donation, and then immediately after voted it on behalf of that donor, right? Um, uh, where you had two people who typically, or two organizations or, uh, how about two lawmakers that almost always vote against each other. Um, all of a sudden we're aligned on a bill. So these are what we call phenoms. Um, and what we did was our brilliant Cal Poly AI team has created a series of these flags that are weighted differently for each, um, for each, uh, uh, t uh, tip or whatever you want to call it, or each anomaly. And so the idea is if you see a, a tip sheet that comes in the system, and this thing is generating them each hearing that comes through, um, each time the governor vetoes something, um, the idea is that the big, the bigger, bigger weighted ones are gonna bump up to the top. And I'll just give you an example of, um, just sort of, and this is what it looks like when you pull it up.

Speaker 2 ([25:28](#)):



So this is just, um, a bill that I wrote, uh, a couple of stories about, including one that's probably gonna publish today that basically looks at, it's a very, um, it's a big gambling bill. And, um, so right here you have why the, the AI says, here's why we think this is a story. Um, it gives you a summary of the, uh, what the bill does. And AI is generating all of this information. And we, we've been using chat, GBT is actually quite good at giving you a little synopsis. Obviously you don't trust this if you're gonna write a story on it, but it, what the idea is, um, this is flagging things that could be of interest to you. So, um, the, the AI also tells you, wow, there's a lot of money involved in this one. And man, there are a ton of interest groups, um, that are involved in this. And this is what I love. So let's pull up, ask me. So this is a major labor union. You can actually see how much money this union has given to individual members of this, uh, legislative body over the years. You could see how often they vote in support or, or opposed what's up?

Speaker 2 ([26:47](#)):

Okay. Yeah. And you can actually see how, um, how regularly they vote in accordance with that group's positions. And, um, since we only have a little bit of, oh, and it generates a few quotes, um, that it pulls directly out of the, out of the transcript, um, and to see if you would be interested in doing, um, you know, pulling those quotes. I don't, I don't tend to use these when I do my stories, but, um, what it does is it kind of gives you a flavor of what the debate is. And so the idea is, say you're a very busy capital reporter, or you're a very busy local reporter, you can actually set this up to keep tabs on your individual lawmaker. We've got us, we're working on getting it set up so it only flags things that are interest to your regional area.

Speaker 2 ([27:32](#)):

And we're setting it up so that a reporter can actually enter keywords on parti particular topics that they care about. So the idea is this thing would spit out tips for those individual reporters. We're gonna be sharing it with them. We're gonna be sharing it with reporters across the state. Um, and I've written about 40 stories. Can we go to some of the stories on the, on the slides? I've written about 40 stories since I got hired in November. Um, about a third of, or I would say probably about two thirds of those were actually generated by these tip sheets. The rest of 'em were these sorts of stories which we, in which we used the data to do some accountability journalism. Um, taking a look at just, you know, how often lawmakers don't vote? No. By the way, Democrats on average vote no less than 1% of the time, which is a striking thing when you're talking about 2,500 bills a, uh, a session.

Speaker 2 ([28:25](#)):

There's not 2,500 good ideas out there. What that indicates is that this is largely just kind of a rubber stamp behind, uh, where negotiations are happening behind closed doors. And there are lobbying groups, uh, with lobbying groups. And then the, the bills are basically just kind of performance that the actual public hearings are just mostly performance where everybody kind of knows what's gonna happen. Anyway. Um, and we took a look at the muddy. Can we look at the next one? Um, yeah. The, these are some of the other stories that we've done where we actually looked at how they actually have an unwritten rule in the legislature where we're not allowed to have debates about, uh, bills because they, A, they don't have time to, because they're hearing so much legislation. Um, and b you know, why would you wanna have, make it look like you're not in a unified front if you're the, the ruling party that controls two thirds of this place? So anyway, all that's to say, um, we didn't have a lot of time. Um, there's more I could be talking about, but that's kind of the nuts and bolts of digital democracy. Does anybody have any questions?

Speaker 5 ([29:32](#)):

Reuse and, uh, to our fans? <inaudible>?

Speaker 2 ([29:36](#)):

No. The digital democracy, the main front of the pay, the main digital democracy site. Um, can we switch back over to the websites? Yeah. The May. This stuff is currently free. Um, how many pa what, how much, uh, traffic are we getting on this? Do you remember? It's

Speaker 6 ([29:55](#)):

50,000 people a month.

Speaker 2 ([29:56](#)):

Yeah. Um, and we figure a lot of those people are mean. There's a whole sort of industry built around the lobbying world, um, and, and, and advocacy and won and all this stuff. We figure a fair amount of that is that, but we're also hoping that it's, you know, being used by journalists. It's being used by everyday people. Um, and, uh, and the tip sheep system, this is something that we are only gonna give out to credential journalists, um, or not credentialed, but, you know, working journalists, um, who can use this however they'd like. This is gonna look a lot prettier, hopefully by the time we roll this out here in a few weeks. So, any other questions?

Speaker 5 ([30:38](#)):

So new, everybody need ai, so, so there safe for you had some, like, some like solution.

Speaker 2 ([30:46](#)):

Yeah. So every, uh, no, the ai, when I talk about AI, with the exception of generating tip sheet summaries, they, they, you've gotta just watch it as a reporter, but this is not a public facing site, right? This is the, this is only for journalists so that the tip sheet system is just generating, Hey, we think you might be interested in this. Sometimes it's a little screwy, but so far it's been pretty good. Everything else is based off of publicly available data and it's just, this is what the data says. Um, the transcripts are reviewed, um, by a human. Um, we have a whole team of Cal Poly students, um, who get paid to actually go back and review the transcripts and make sure that the speakers line up and all that kind of stuff. So, okay. Thank you so much. Thanks.

Speaker 1 ([31:34](#)):

Thank you, Ryan. We are going to our next session now. That will begin shortly.