



Smurf Hunting

Creating an “Act Blue” Activity Report* - Part 1.



Chris Arsenault 9 May 2023

Distribution: draft dev.2

*Works for “WinRed” as well!

Please do not distribute.

(Testing/feedback is needed prior to widespread distribution.)

“Back o’napkin technique”

Close enough for government cleaning

Quick & easy, but with ~95%
financial accuracy.

Results are presentable as 100%
factual based on FEC filings.



(Assumes minimal familiarity with spreadsheet software)

This technique is for the second phase of finding
“smurfs”* in the FEC database.

You should already have a list of high
transaction names for your state.

There’s a completely different
process for that initial identification.

Ready?





Federal Election Commission
UNITED STATES — of — AMERICA

Calendar

Campaign finance data ▼

Help for candidates and committees ▼

[Home](#) › [Campaign finance data](#) › [Browse data](#) › Individual contributions

Begin by obtaining data from the FEC link:

https://www.fec.gov/data/receipts/individual-contributions/?two_year_transaction_period=2022&min_date=01/01/2021&max_date=12/31/2022

 **Edit filters** ◀

RECIPIENT NAME OR ID

Limit 10 recipient names or IDs

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Name

Limit 10 contributor names or IDs

☒

ZIP code

Individual contributions

Viewing **23,243** filtered results for:

2019-2020 ✕

✕

This example's name has been redacted, but the data is from the FEC.

Contributor name

Recipient

State

Empl

Once on the FEC Individual contributions page make sure you filter it to a 2 year election cycle of interest.

You can find filter adjustments in this panel.

Download the resulting comma separated value (CSV) file.
Import/Open in your spreadsheet software.

AI	AJ	AK
memo_code_full	contribution_receipt_date	
	2019-01-07	
	2019-01-07	
	2019-01-07	
	2019-01-07	
	2019-01-07	
	2019-01-07	

Find the **contribution_receipt_date** column and sort ascending.

You can do this by right-clicking on the spreadsheet column header. (In this case at AJ)

This must be done 1st.

Instructions are always in gold boxes.

Follow the yellow brick road...

The **contribution_receipt_date** is known as a field. Fields are tracked in columns, while every row is considered a record. This guide will identify the field names (columns) as much as possible.

Helpful information for the curious (why?), is in the teal green.

[illegible]

Next - categorize/group based on 2 columns: **filing_form** and **committee_name**

They must be in that order of grouping.

There are only 3 forms possible: F3X, F3 and F3P.

ActBlue will likely be the top committee after the initial sort.

The FEC has many more forms (of course!) but unless you're investigating lobbyists, or other political creatures, you don't need to worry about them.

filing_form:

▼ **F3X**

committee_name:

▶ **ACTBLUE**

▶ **DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE**

▶ **PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER**

▶ **314 ACTION FUND**

▶ **MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION**

▶ **EDF ACTION VOTES**

Turn on your categories/group option to view your data.

Use the disclosure triangles (or + boxes) to open up the categories/groups.

If you don't see the F3X filing forms, close all the grouped rows and you should see it.

	committee_id	committee_name
filing_form: ▼ F3X		
committee_name:	Count (All):	
▶ ACTBLUE	17231	
▶ DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC N	99	
▶ PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER	383	
▶ 314 ACTION FUND	1	
▶ MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION	101	
▶ EDF ACTION VOTES	54	
▶ DCCC	106	

When you select a category/
group header cell, you should
see group function options.

We want to count by filing_form how
many transactions were filed with this
individual contributor/donor info.

ACTBLUE, like all other PACs, has an FEC assigned **committee_id**. The FEC was formed to regulate these committees. Individual contributors are secondary when it comes to FEC concerns.

	committee_id	committee_name
filing_form:		
▼ F3X		
committee_name:	Count (All):	
▶ ACTBLUE		
▶ DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC N		
▶ PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER		
▶ 314 ACTION FUND		
▶ MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION		
▶ EDF ACTION VOTES		
▶ DCCC		
▶ END CITIZENS UNITED		
▶ PROGRESSIVE TURNOUT PROJECT		
▶ IT STARTS TODAY	13	

No Summary

Group Name

Sum

Average

✓ Count (All)

Maximum

Minimum

Average (All)

Count

Count (Blank)

Count (Duplicates)

Count (Unique)

Median

Rows

STDEV

Hide Label Row

With Apple's Numbers it looks like this, but Excel has similar functionality.

	committee_id	committee_name
filing_form:	Count (All):	
▼ F3X	20606	
committee_name:	Count (All):	
▶ ACTBLUE	17231	
▶ DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC N	99	
▶ PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER	383	
▶ 314 ACTION FUND	1	
▶ MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION	101	
▶ EDF ACTION VOTES	54	
▶ DCCC	106	

All F3X form (conduit committee) transactions combined will total here. Your results will vary based on individual contributors.

You'll likely find ActBlue **overwhelmingly** has more transactions than every other committee.

Next we need to find how many committees are present.

	committee_id	committee_name
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):
▼ F3X	20606	43
committee_name:	Count (All):	
▶ ACTBLUE	17231	
▶ DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC N	99	
▶ PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER	383	
▶ 314 ACTION FUND	1	
▶ MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION	101	
▶ EDF ACTION VOTES	54	
▶ DCCC	106	
▶ END CITIZENS UNITED	134	

Click in the category/group cell for **committee_name** and select the Count(unique) function.

This shows how many F3X (conduit) committees filed, but will also indicate how many F3 and F3P committees as well.

When looking for transaction counts, make sure you use a column that will always be filled in, such as **committee_id**.

Political Action Committees come in 2 major classes: Conduits and Campaigns. Conduits (F3X) are party & policy oriented, so they must serve multiple candidates. Campaign committees exist only for single candidates for Congress (F3) & the President (F3P). This is the major reason for **filing_form** differences.

The next step provides more insight as to why we need to carefully consider these transaction counts.

You can select and hide columns to make your analysis quicker by reducing scrolling.

	committee_id	committee_name	contributor_id	rec
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):		
▼ F3X	20606	43		
committee_name:	Count (All):		Count (Blank):	
► ACTBLUE	17231		11847	⚙
			86	
► PROGRESSIVE TAKEC	383		334	
► 31			1	
► M			101	
► EDF ACTION VOTES	54		54	
► D			106	
► END CITIZENS UNITE			123	

Right click in the **contributor_id** column and select the Count(blank) function.

The **contributor_id** column will only be filled with the committee_id# of the PAC receiving earmarked funds after a \$200.00 threshold has been met.

The \$200.00 threshold is to reduce paperwork, but it allows many transactions to occur without requiring the committee to report the original source of the funds. ActBlue will still pass funds along, but identifies the receiving committee elsewhere.

	committee_id	committee_name	contributor_id	contribution_receipt_amount	co
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):			
▼ F3X	20606	43			
committee_name:	Count (All):	Count (Blank):	Sum:		
▶ ACTBLUE	17231	11847	69799.72		
▶ DNC SERVICES CORP	99	86	1040.50		
▶ PROGRESSIVE TAKEC	383	334	1921.00		
▶ 314 ACTION FUND		1	10.00		
▶ MOVEON.ORG POLITI		101	715.56		
▶ EDF ACTION VOTES	54	54	273.00		
▶ DCCC	10	106	1085.00		
▶ END CITIZENS UNITE	13	123	546.84		
▶ PROGRESSIVE TURN	167	128	1323.00		
▶ IT STARTS TODAY			75.20		
▶ DAGA PAC			362.45		

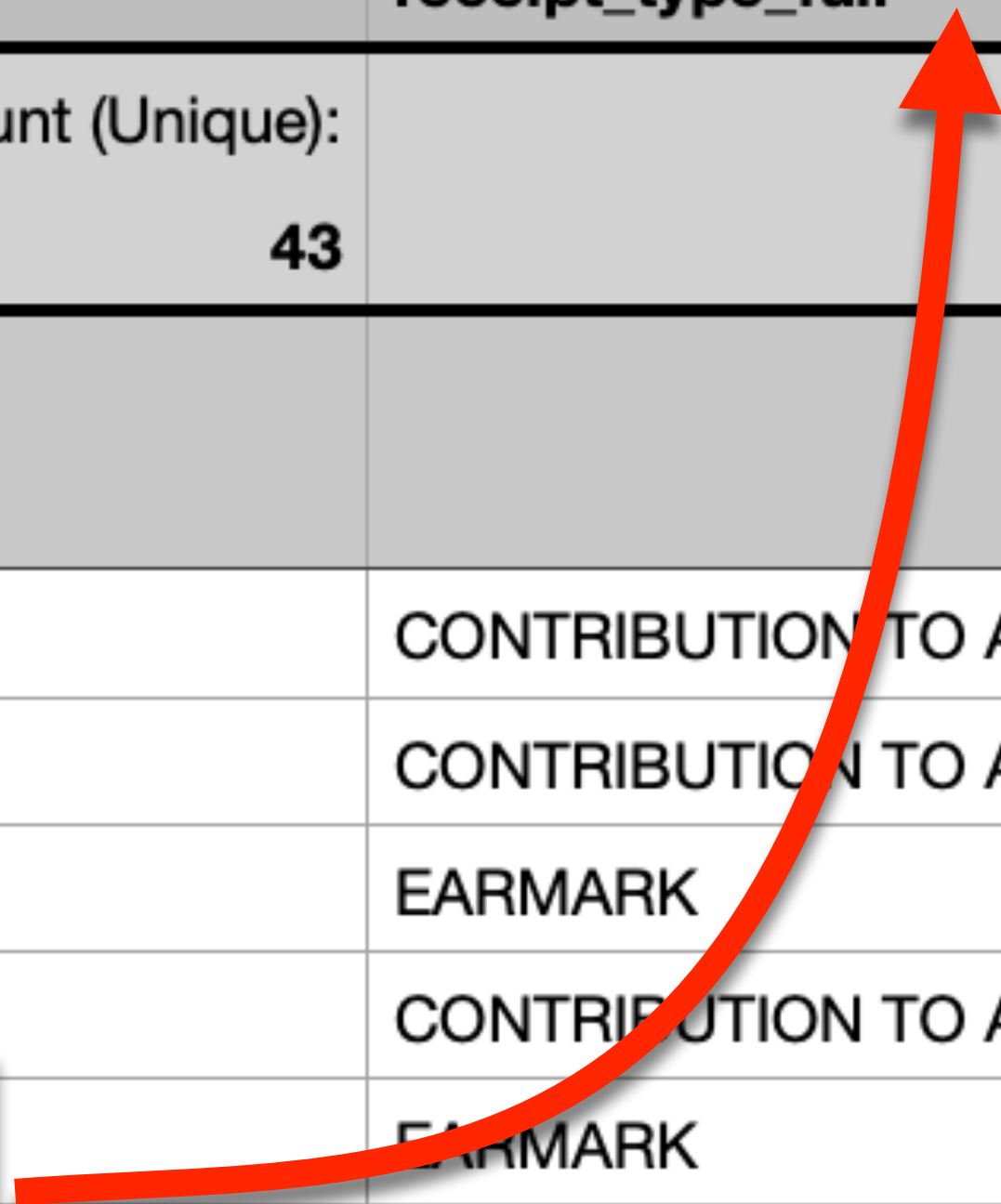
Now sum the **contribution_receipt_amount** but make sure you only do it for the **committee_id** group.

We are almost there - but we need a few more very important data points.

We need to know what ActBlue is keeping and what it is passing on as a conduit committee.

	committee_id	committee_name	receipt_type_full	contribution_receipt_date
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):		
▼ F3X	20606	43		
committee_id:				Count (All):
▼ C00401224				17231
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-07
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-07
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK	2019-01-07
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-07
			EARMARK	2019-01-07
			EARMARK	2019-01-07
			CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-07
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK	2019-01-07
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-08
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK	2019-01-08
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK	2019-01-08
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	2019-01-08

Locate the **receipt_type_full** column and right-click on it to create 2 columns after it. You'll need one column for earmarks and another for ActBlue's "take".



	committee_id	committee_name	receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):			
▼ F3X	20606	43			
committee_id:					
▼ C00401224					
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		

It should look like this when you're done.

	committee_id	committee_name	receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks
filing_form:	Count (All):	Count (Unique):			
▼ F3X	20606	43			
committee_id:					
▼ C00401224					
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE		
	C00401224	ACTBLUE	EARMARK		

Now find the first row/record of ActBlue's committee **receipt_type_full** entry.

Click on ActBlue's Take cell.

Enter the following formula:
= IF(COUNTIF(AG2,"=*ACT BLUE"),AN2,0)



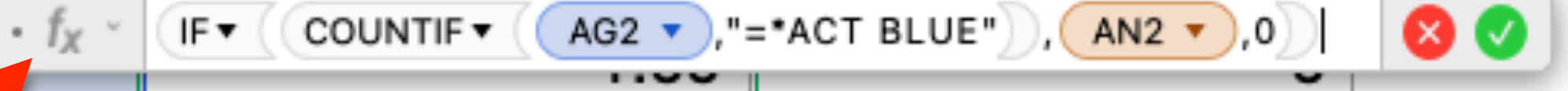
In our formula AG2 refers to the **receipt_type_full** cell to the left.



And AN2 refers to the **contribution_receipt_amount** cell in the same row. (Your actual spreadsheet cell references may differ.)

In English, our formula says that if the sentence contains “ACT BLUE” then copy the **contribution_receipt_amount** to this cell. Otherwise put in a zero.

receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	contribution_receipt_amount
			Sum: 69799.72
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			1.00
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			0.50
EARMARK			2.50
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			1.10
EARMARK			11.00
EARMARK			5.00
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			0.50
EARMARK			
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			0.50
EARMARK			5.00
EARMARK			
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			

receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	contribution_receipt_date
	Sum: 5915.36	Sum: 63884.36	Count (All): 17231
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	2.50	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	1.10	0	2019-01-07
E	0	11.00	2019-01-07
E	0	5.00	2019-01-07
C	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK			-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			-08
E	0	5.00	2019-01-08
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-08

Here's what this looks like in Apple's Numbers App.

For **receipt_type_full** ActBlue uses only: "Contribution to Act Blue" or "Earmark".

After entering the formula and seeing the result, scroll down to the last cell of ActBlue's F3X records, press the shift key and click to select it and use the table fill down command.

All we're doing is separating Earmark (conduit) activity from ActBlue's "fees".

receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	contribution_receipt_date
	Sum: 5915.36	Sum: 63884.36	Count (All): 17231
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	2.50	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	1.10	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	11.00	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	10.00	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-08
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-08
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-08

Do the same set of operations for the Earmarks column, but alter the formula to use the "EARMARK" **receipt_type_full**. Then fill down for that column.

fx IF COUNTIF AG2 "=EARMARK" \$AN2 ,0

receipt_type_full	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	contribution_receipt_date
	Sum:	Sum:	Count (All):
	5915.36	63884.36	17231
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE			
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	2.50	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	1.10	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	11.00	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-07
EARMARK	0	10.00	2019-01-07
CONTRIBUTION TO ACT BLUE	0.50	0	2019-01-08
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-08
EARMARK	0	5.00	2019-01-08

Add category/group Sums for both ActBlue's Take and Earmarks, the same way we did earlier.

We've collected the financial data and the next step is to actually show frequency of transactions by looking at what the committee claimed were the contribution receipt dates.

Turn category/groups off and select the entire **contribution_receipt_date** column, but deselect the header column. Change the cell format to remove the useless time portion.

Next - add a new column after the **contribution_receipt_date** column and title it **Days Between Contributions**.

Distinguish between the original field names and your own by using Upper case for each word.

marks	contribution_receipt_date	Days_Between_Contributions	
0	2019-01-07		
0	2019-01-07	0	
0	2.50	2019-01-07	0
0	2019-01-07	0	
11.00	2019-01-07	0	
5.00	2019-01-07	0	
0	2019-01-07	0	
10.00	2019-01-07	0	
0.50	0	2019-01-08	1
0	5.00	2019-01-08	0
0	5.00	2019-01-08	0
0.50	0	2019-01-08	0
0	5.00	2019-01-10	2
0.50	0	2019-01-10	0
0	5.00	2019-01-11	1

ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	contribution_receipt_date	Days_Between_Contributions
Sum: 5915.36	Sum: 63884.36	Count (Unique): 638	Average: 0.04
1.00	0	2019-01-07	
0.50	0	2019-01-07	0
0	2.50	2019-01-07	0
		2019-01-07	0
		2019-01-07	0
		2019-01-07	0
0.50	0	2019-01-07	0
0	10.00	2019-01-07	0
0.50	0	2019-01-08	1

Turn categories/groups back on.

In our committee_name subcategory, apply a Count(Unique) function for the **contribution_receipt_date** field and an average function in the **Days Between Contributions**.

“Sum-thin’s up!”

Create your own
Report for Individual
Contribution Oversight.
(RICO)



Revenge of the Nerds?

Now that the data has been generated, we need to create a 2-part report for this individual: A summary like this one and a detailed breakdown of the transactions (shown on next page.)

Extensive analysis lead to this method. The only differences we can't reconcile are due to FEC filing "gaps" under \$200.00 threshold.

Filing Form	Committees	Transactions	Transaction Ratio	Receipts	ActBlue Earmarks	All other Receipts (through ActBlue)	ActBlue Take	Nonitemized Receipts	Financial activity
F3X - ActBlue	1	17231	74.13%	69799.72	63884.36		5915.36	3931.65	94.37%
F3X - Others	42	3375	14.52%	27694.93		27694.93			
F3	38	2445	10.52%	23254.42		23254.42			
F3P	2	192	0.83%	3088		3088			
Totals	83	23243	100.00%	123837.07		54037.35			

Break "ActBlue" out separately. Extensive analysis indicates it contributes to every other committee.

This number is wrong (almost double) because of all these earmarks.

These were summed independently, but indicate nearly 100% of the funds were earmarked through ActBlue.

By breaking out all contributions earmarked through ActBlue we've accounted for most of the transactional activity attributed to the individual. This is sufficient for asking them directly if this is true.

Final finding: ACTBLUE is responsible for handling 94.37% activity for this individual.

Form	Committee Name	Kind Count	Transactions	Not Earmarked	ActBlue's Take	Earmarks	Contribution Dates	Days Between Contributions
Form data was filed on	Name committee publicly identifies itself as.	Count of committees submitting a specific form. (indicating status as Conduit or Campaign	Count of itemized transactions each committee testifies is true on their filings.	Count of transactions not identified with any other committee (no contributor_id #) Multiple disposition of funds are possible.	Summed \$ amount indicated as a contribution to ActBlue	Summed \$ amount indicated by ActBlue contributed to another committee	Number of unique calendar dates through 2 year election cycle each committee testifies as receiving a contribution from this donor. Most are earmarked through ActBlue making them duplicate records: one for ActBlue, the other received by the earmarked committee.	The average duration between transactions. Notice ActBlue dominates transaction processing.
F3X	Conduits	43	20606				730	
	ACTBLUE		17231	11847	\$ 5915.36	\$ 63884.36	638	0d 1h 1m
	DNC SERVICES CORP / DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL COMMITTEE		99	86	0	0	59	5d 22h 47m
	PROGRESSIVE TAKEOVER		383	334	0	0	219	1d 10h 7m
	314 ACTION FUND		1	1	0	0	1	0d 0h 0m
	MOVEON.ORG POLITICAL ACTION		101	101	0	0	78	4d 20h 26m
					0	0	51	8d 3h 37m
					0	0	74	4d 3h 39m
					0	0	96	2d 23h 6m
					0	0	140	2d 8h 40m
					0	0	3	14d 6h 0m
					0	0	39	6d 10h 32m
					0	0	144	1d 7h 53m
					0	0	82	1d 8h 44m
					0	0	80	1d 20h 13m
	NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC TRAINING COMMITTEE PAC		202	49	0	0	114	1d 1h 26m
	CONGRESSIONAL B...				0	0	35	1d 16h 59m
	ELECT DEMOCRATIC				0	0	141	0d 21h 34m
	EMILY'S LIST				0	0	9	18d 13h 5m
	EQUALITY PAC				0	0	49	3d 14h 53m
	DSCC				0	0	52	3d 9h 25m
	DEMOCRATIC ACTIO				0	0	115	1d 0h 58m
	GRASSROOTS VICTORY PAC		25	14	0	0	25	6d 14h 0m
	COMMITTEE TO PROTECT MEDICARE PAC		66	66	0	0	44	2d 18h 6m

This detailed report indicates committees activities related to frequency of transactions. For instance over a 2 year election period of 730 days, ActBlue is claiming they saw 638 days of contributions from this individual. Given the transactions (17231) That’s an average of ~1 transaction per hour (that average of .04 of a day in our example.)

If you successfully prepared your data using the instructions in this guide, you’ll be ready to move on to **Creating an “Act Blue” Activity Report - Part 2**

Ask the donor!

“SmurFini”

All necessary data is there.

Generate more details if needed.

This technique is least intrusive as possible.



No cartoon Smurfs were harmed in the making of this document.