



Working with Downloadable FEC Data Files using MS Access

I. Location & Description

From www.fec.gov, click on: “Campaign Finance Reports and Data” → “Download Data Files Using FTP” → “Detailed Files” or go to:

<http://www.fec.gov/finance/disclosure/ftpdet.shtml>

On the “Detailed Files” page, scroll down until you see several tables, each with a light blue bar across the top and titled by election cycle (going back to 1994). For example, “2003 – 2004 Committees.”

Each table has six rows. The first column of each row is the file name. The second column contains the data zip file. The third column contains a printable data format description.

The six categories (rows) of data available for each cycle are:

1. Committee Master File (addresses of registered committees)
2. Candidate Master File (addresses of registered candidates)
3. Contributions by Individuals (to all candidates and committees)
*this file is large and may take several minutes to download
4. Adds, Changes, Deletes (for above file, i.e., amended info, refunds etc.)
5. Contributions to Candidates (and other expenditures) from Committees
6. Any Transaction from One Committee to Another

Note: Similar files are available for previous election cycles. See <ftp://ftp.fec.gov/FEC/>

II. Download

Choose the file which suits your interest. For example, this walk-through will use the “Committee Master File” for 2004. In the third column to the far right of the file name click on the data format description file. For example, “cm04.txt.” The Data Description will open in your browser. Print it out. You will need this to format the raw data during importation to your spreadsheet.

Please note that each data file formats differently. Refer to appropriate Data Description.

Next, you will download the raw data file itself to your desktop. Choose your file of interest from the second column of the table, to the right of the file name. For example, “cm04.zip.” Click the file and a “File Download” box will appear. Click on the “Save” option. The “Save As” box will appear. Next to “Save In,” choose your desktop. Then click “Save.” Once the file download completes you should see the file on your desktop as a zip folder icon. It will be titled, for example “cm04.zip.” Minimize your internet browser, you are finished with it.

Click the data zip file on your desktop. It will open into a window and you will see a folder. It will be titled similar to "foia04." Click this folder, it will open and a file will appear. It will be titled similar to "foiacm.dta." Click and drag this file onto your desktop, close the window.

Left click the file twice, slowly. This should highlight the title and insert the cursor, allowing you to change the file name. Delete the file extension and rename it as a text file. For example, change "foiacm.dta" to "foiacm.txt." Hit Enter. A "Rename" box will appear asking if you are sure you want to change the file name extension. Click "Yes."

III. Import & Format

Open Microsoft Access. Click "File," then click "Open." The "Open" box should appear. Next to "Look In" choose your desktop. Then, next to "Files of Type" choose "All Files." Highlight your data text file, for example "foiacm.txt." Click "Open."

A box should appear titled similar to "foiacm1 : Database (Access 2000 file format)." In this box, under "Objects" "Tables" should be highlighted and also "Create table in Design view."

Another box should appear titled "Link Text Wizard." Select "Fixed Width" and click "Advanced."

Another box should appear titled similar to "Foiacm Link Specification." In the bottom of this box you will see a section titled "Field Information." This is where you will format the raw data into meaningful columns by inserting column breaks. The Data Description you printed off earlier specifies where these breaks are, and what each column represents.

In the Data Description, look for the section titled "Tape Specifications and Data Format," probably on the first page of your printout. Just below this section is a table with columns titled "Variable" (these are the column names, i.e., "Committee Identification"), "Columns" (this is the start and end or range of the columns, i.e., "1-9") and "Desc." or "Field Desc." (this is the width of the columns, i.e., "9s"). Basically, one letter or number of raw data fits into one space on the spreadsheet. Since committee identification numbers are always 9 digits long, they will take up 9 spaces in the spreadsheet, or be "9s" in width. In this spreadsheet the committee identification numbers will take up spaces "1-9." The rest of the columns build on this. We will format the first 3 columns for practice (although there are more columns to complete the entire spreadsheet).

Under "Field Information" in the "Foiacm Link Specification" box, click in the first row of the first column and the cursor should appear. Delete "Field1" and type in "Committee Identification" which is the name of the first column (the fields correspond to individual columns). The next column is titled "Data Type." For this file we recommend leaving the value as "text." Now click in the first row of the "start" column, type in "1" since this is the space that the data in this column starts. Click in the first row of the "width" column. Delete what is there and type in "9" since the width of the data in this column is 9 spaces long.

Click next to “Field2” in the “Field Name” column. Delete and type in “Committee Name.” Tab over to the “start” column. Type in “10” according to the Data Description. Tab over to the “width” column. Type in “90.”

Click next to “Field3” in the “Field Name” column. Delete and type in “Treasurer Name.” Tab over to the “start” column. Type in “100.” Tab over to the “width” column. Type in “38.”

In this manner, complete the rest of the Field Information as specified by the Data Description. When you are done it should resemble this:

Field Name	Data Type	Start	Width
Committee ID	Text	1	9
Committee Name	Text	10	90
Treasurer Name	Text	100	38
Street (combine fields “street one” & “street two”)	Text	138	68
City	Text	206	18
State	Text	224	2
Zip Code	Text	226	5
Committee Designation	Text	231	1
Committee Type	Text	232	1
Committee Party	Text	233	3
Filing Frequency	Text	236	1
Interest Group Category	Text	237	1
Connected Organization’s Name	Text	238	38
Candidate Identification	Text	276	9

Notice that a columns’ start value is the previous columns’ start value plus its’ width value (except for the first column, which is always “1”).

When finished, click “OK.” Click “Next” the next three times, then click “Finish.”

The “Link Text Wizard” will appear with the message “Finished linking table...” Click “OK.”

You will be left again with the box that says “foiacm1 : Database (Access 2000 file format).” Make sure that under “Objects” “Tables” is highlighted. Click on the data file to the right, for example “Foiacm.” The data will appear in a spreadsheet. Highlight all columns, click on “Format,” “Column Width” and “Best Fit.” Or, click on individual columns to resize them as you prefer. Your spreadsheet is finished!

One last tip, the final Access file (“foiacm.mdb”) and the text file (“foiacm.txt”) are linked. If you move one or the other into different folders, you may have to re-link the files to get them to open properly. From the Access file, click “Tools” → “Database Utilities” → “Linked Table Manager.” Check “Foiacm” and click “Ok” and then “Close.”

*****This is an unofficial guide. Some steps may vary. If you have comments, suggestions or need a live voice to help you, please contact the FEC Public Records Office at 1-800-424-9530, locally at 202-694-1120 or via e-mail at pubrec@fec.gov.