Center for Democracy & Technology Transition Memo
Theme: Promoting Open Government
Issue: Using the Internet to Build Participatory Democracy

✦**Issue/Problem.** The Internet and other new communications technologies (including the cell phone) have enormous potential to promote interactive citizen involvement in government decision-making. However, the interactive space between the government and the public has only begun to develop. Under current rules and implementations, too much government information is not online, not easily found, or not easily used. Congress lags as much if not more than the Executive Branch. Meanwhile, interactive, participatory use of the technology is very limited.

✦**Policy History.** The E-Government Act of 2002 established a mandate to take government services online. Agencies accelerated their development of websites and some created interactive tools for their constituents. However, progress has been slow. While the federal government makes thousands of decisions each year, often citizens do not have an easy ability to comment. Many rulemakings are still the exclusive domain of lobbyists and established interest groups.

A prime example is *regulations.gov*. One of the key aspects of the E-Government Act, regulations.gov allows citizens to search for and comment on proposed rulemakings. However, regulations.gov has had trouble coming to full fruition. The site is not easy to use for the public, and agencies have only partially embraced the move to e-Rulemaking. The process of submitting comments via regulations.gov is not transparent, and many users send paper copies as well in order to ensure that the comment is read. While regulations.gov has become a widely used site, there are many elements of e-Rulemaking that can be improved upon, revolutionizing the service and further enhancing its value to the public.

The E-Government Act established an E-Government Administrator within OMB in order to direct the development of public-facing applications and services. However, the office has become consumed with overseeing IT procurement and management within the government, instead of focusing on developing cross-agency initiatives and public facing applications and services for citizens.

The federal government has also been slow to embrace new Internet technologies that could help aid participatory democracy. In some cases, legitimate concerns are raised about following open government law, such as the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA). However, the lack of ability to directly utilize even established commercial sites such as YouTube seems out of step with technological progress.

✦**What the Obama Administration Should Do.** President Obama and Congress should utilize new technology to promote interactive citizen involvement in government decision-making.

(1) In order to free the E-Government Administrator to work on public facing E-Government initiatives, President Obama should appoint a Chief Technology Office (CTO) to develop a federal technology strategy. This would allow the E-Government Administrator to work with agencies to encourage creative thinking and development of new initiatives to engage citizens in their government.

(2) President Obama and Congress should embrace Web 2.0 technology by taking advantage of "wikis" and social networking tools for public decision-making processes, augmenting traditional technologies and methods for commenting on proposed federal regulations and other policy initiatives. Tools like regulations.gov can benefit from innovative use of new tools to engage citizens, and agencies should be able to use third party web tools to enhance their services. The Internet has served as a test bed for thousands of new services, with a few rising to the top. The government should actively look to learn lessons from these services and implement their features to further e-Government.

(3) President Obama should promote the use of open formats and search-accessible websites in order to make sure that the information produced by the government is available to those who can use it. One of the key elements of interactive citizen involvement is the availability of reliable data. Government agencies produce some of the most trustworthy and comprehensive information, but often it is not easily accessible to the public. Information management within agencies should be improved, to provide more of the information created with taxpayer dollars back to the public directly via the Internet without the need for a FOIA request. Better design of information management infrastructures would force agencies to make disclosure decisions at the time of document creation. Systems built with the proactive goal of dissemination would not only enhance the public's access to information, but would also help agencies fulfill their missions and cut down on many inefficiencies.

With a relatively small investment of time, agencies can ensure that their databases are found through commercial search engines and USA.gov search. The government should encourage the publication of federal government information in open standards that can allow for the full utilization of a major government resource—its data.

(4) President Obama should encourage innovative uses of new technology platforms. The next administration should embrace and back up agencies that are willing to attempt pilots using the latest interactive technologies. There are many precedents in the real world for governments to work through open media, and government sources adding more content to the online ecosystem will foster involvement from citizens on a new level.

✴ For More Information.

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