

Join the Evolution – Ten Practical Online Steps for Government Support of Democracy

By Steven Clift
Chair, E-Democracy.Org and Ashoka Fellow

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Does e-government have anything to do with democracy and citizen participation? Let's get straight to the point - not yet.

Should it?

Yes. Government should be leading a charge into the increasingly and fundamentally interactive web.

Information access, considered the safe starting point for government accountability online now mostly presents the public a daunting needle in a huge haystack. This system is so complicated that the valuable and substantive information that government produces is often ignored in the increasingly interactive public lives of active citizens. . The lack of real and effective online access to governance will substantially increase cynicism about and distrust in government among a public that demands a more participatory representative democracy.

A bit of context: I coordinated e-government for the State of Minnesota in its early days. As a citizen, I independently started E-Democracy.Org which created the world's first election information and discussion website in 1994. When "services first, democracy later" enveloped most e-government projects, I went independent in late 1997. Since then, I've spoken and consulted across 26 countries on "e-democracy."

Here are the 10 things I would do in government at every level to help rescue our democracy in the information age.

1. Timely, personalized access to information that matters.

Government decision-making information is not really public or relevant if people cannot act on it when it still matters. Give people tools like personalized e-mail alerts based on keywords, location, etc. and eliminate the "nobody told me" backlash government often receives due to poor public outreach. Every government needs a "what's new" democracy portal or a thematic section covering all democratic processes as part of their main website.

2. Help elected officials receive and sort, then better understand and respond to e-mail.

E-mail overload is the number one complaint I hear from elected officials around the world. Most want to respond effectively, but simply aren't being provided the tools they need. If there ever was an opportunity for open source collaboration among governments, this is it. In general, our representatives and representative institutions must start to invest in the online infrastructure they need to connect directly with the public they represent.

3. Dedicate at least 10% of new e-government developments to democracy.

Let's define democracy starting with public input. In an e-service initiative, the 10% should start with citizen focus groups to guide the design of the service, usability testing and studies to generate user input and accountability, and post-transaction user surveys. If the investment is a new content management system for information access, then use the 10% to add personalization and survey input features or democratized navigation (those nifty menus that show you the top ten articles viewed that day or week).

4. Announce all government public meetings on the Internet in a uniform manner.

All public meeting notices, agendas, handouts, and digital recordings must be online. The system should be standards-based and tie state-by-state systems into a national network covering federal, state, and local government public meetings. This is the only way for people to ask to be pro-actively notified of any government public meetings within a certain geographic area addressing specific topics that interest them.

5. Allow citizens to look-up *all* of their elected officials from the very local to national in one search.

Along with the ability to look-up all public meetings, Americans should have the right to easily determine who all the elected and appointed officials are who represent them currently. Just before elected and appointed officials assume office, every government unit should be required to submit contact information for those officials into a national database.

6. Host online public hearings and dialogues (or "e-consultations" as they are known outside the U.S.)

As in-person public meetings begin to incorporate live online features, envision more deliberate online exchanges to improve the outcomes of the decision-making process. If your government agency hosts three public hearings across the country or your state, host the fourth hearing online over a week or two and improve the format in the process. In 10 years, the legislatures, commissions and city councils not holding hearings online will be in the minority.

7. Embrace the rule of law by mandating the most democratically empowering online services and rights across the whole of government.

Technology itself is not forcing real institutional democratic change. I estimate that 90% of the democratic innovations online that really share power are based on a political tradition or law that existed before the Internet arrived. If we want all citizens to benefit universally from a more wired democracy, then now is time to update our legal requirements and fund core online democracy services.

8. Promote dissemination through access to raw data from decision-making information systems.

Let's explode decision-making data, like Congressional information and rulemaking related content into bits via XML and open standards and make it easy to re-use public government data from many sources to create views and searches that provide insight, understanding, and accountability. Think "Web 2.0" interactivity built on top of government data by those outside of government.

9. Fund Open Source sharing internationally across e-government.

Sharing and supporting open source software takes resources – a consortium of national governments need to step up with collaborative funding. The new and less cluttered area of e-participation tools are an ideal starting point within e-government to reduce technology costs and build systems for use by multiple governments.. Efforts to place modules and customizations out for community use will be key. Government and its vendors must contribute code back for the wheels of reciprocal value to start turning.

10. Local up – a strategic approach to building local democracy online.

To build e-participation momentum, citizens need to experience results they can see and touch. By investing in transferable local models and tools, more people will use the Internet as a tool to strength their communities, protect and enrich their families and neighborhoods, and be heard in a meaningful way. Every community needs an "online town hall," E-Democracy.Org calls them Issues Forums, for agenda-setting discussion of public issues. Comparative evaluation of access and participation related online service and content indicators will introduce efforts for an online "Democracy Tune-up." This same tune-up concept should be applied at the state and federal level as well.

Conclusion

In the early days, folks thought the Internet was inherently democratic. Parts of it are, but that mistaken sense of technological determinisms has not carried over to make constitutional and legally-ground representative processes more open and responsive. Today, "politics as usual" online may actually make things worse. Civically conceived e-participation efforts need to counter such negative trends rather than being viewed as an extra option. Ultimately, each generation needs to rebuild democracy with the special tools of their time. Our tools are online and our democracy needs us.

Steven Clift leads the "Online Consultation and E-Participation" online community of practice at DoWire.Org and shares numerous articles on e-democracy from Publicus.Net. An extended version of this article with specific examples is available from that site.