



Gateway to Gov

**Gateway to Gov – Advancing Civic Engagement by Enhancing Civic Dialogue**

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## **Gateway to Gov Project Overview**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gateway to Gov's mission is to provide an electronic public square that promotes civic engagement by enhancing communication between constituents and their elected officials. By providing a non-commercial, non-partisan, neutral platform we hope to bring together a wide range of individuals with differing political opinions and socio-economic backgrounds, spurring them to discuss the issues they face and communicate these issues with their elected representatives. Participation is the lifeblood of a healthy democracy. It is critically important that more citizens are brought back into the political process.

For the past 40 years civic engagement has steadily declined and attitudes about government have plummeted to an all-time low. Between 1964 and 2000 the proportion of Americans who cast their ballots declined 14%.<sup>i</sup> In the same time period citizens reporting a general 'faith in the government' dropped from 73% to 36%.<sup>ii</sup> Signing petitions – the most common form of civic engagement – dropped 22% from 1964 to 2000.<sup>iii</sup> These statistics all point towards a decrease in civic engagement.

Despite the downward trend there are signs that a more active, engaged citizenry is ready to emerge. With the advent of internet-based communication people can connect in ways that were never before possible. Websites such as Meetup.com and Craigslist.org created new opportunities for people to interact and foster community. With over three million members MoveOn.org demonstrates that a substantial number of individuals are interested in contributing to the political process.

Previous websites have attempted to do portions of what Gateway to Gov proposes but have not taken the same strategic approach. Gateway to Gov provides a neutral forum, free from editorial control from the host organization, in which citizens and elected officials can directly interact. To ensure the integrity of the platform, users are prompted to verify their identity and/or voter registration status. The system provides a geographic context, enabling discussion of issues ranging from the local to national level.

### **HOW IT WORKS**

#### **Interacting with Representatives**

The first goal of the platform is to enhance communication between elected officials and their constituents. Every elected official will have his or her own 'Interaction Center', populated with their factual information (contact information, committee memberships, etc.) and the decisions made while in office. The Interaction Center will serve as a shared workspace, facilitating two-way communication between representatives and their constituents.

Representatives will control certain aspects of the page – public statements, contact info, etc. –

and constituents will direct the topics of discussion. Users will have the ability to submit open letters to which the representative may publicly respond. All representatives will receive weekly updates reflecting the activity of their constituents.

### **Election Centers**

When a ballot is drawn up for a given race, all of the candidates on the ballot will be issued their own Interaction Center. He/She will use this space to discuss and respond to issues raised by their potential constituents. A panel of questions will be voted upon by the citizens in the area and made available for comment by all of the candidates. The election center will allow voters to view a side-by-side comparison of the responses given by the candidates, enabling constituents to gauge the opinions and positions of the potential candidates.

### **Issue Discussion**

The second facet of the platform is a forum for the discussion of social and political issues. Citizens control the agenda by ranking the issues entered by other users. As users express interest in an issue, the issue rises in prominence. When a user expresses disinterest, prominence of the issue diminishes. Users can also propose solutions and/or rank the solutions that other users have proposed. Popular solutions rise to the top of the list; less popular ones sink. Discussion of an issue, say, for example, global warming, works in a similar way: individuals can express their views on the topic and the more popular a statement, the more prominently it is displayed.

### **Editorial Control**

Users are in full control of the content of the site; Gateway to Gov will provide the venue for discussion but will not exercise editorial control. Users control the organization of issues by assigning keywords to them, a process known as ‘tagging’. The more users who tag an issue with a particular term, the more relevant that particular term becomes. Issues on Gateway to Gov are categorized by topic and geographic region ranging from the local to national level. To establish the geographic scope of an issue, users are asked to tag the issue with one of the following: neighborhood, city, state, regional, national or international. Users are also responsible for moderating the site by flagging inappropriate or abusive content, thereby enabling the site to be a fully self-regulating community.

### **Citizen Friendly Interface**

Every user has their own personal ‘Civic Dashboard’, a page which displays the status of the issues they have expressed concern about as well as the top issues and/or topics being discussing by their representatives. A social networking component allows users to view the issues their friends are concerned about, providing a simple means of promoting and publicizing the issues to their friends.

## **SYSTEM INTEGRITY**

Gateway to Gov intends to lay the groundwork for a platform that is fully transparent, verifiable and accountable. As Ronald Reagan famously said, “Trust, but verify.” Our approach is two-pronged: the first prong relates to data transparency, the second, verifying the identity of constituents.

### **Data Availability**

In an effort to provide complete transparency all issues, solutions and ranking information will be made available in the form of XML data feeds. These feeds will serve two purposes: First, they provide accountability by allowing others to verify the poll results achieved on the site. Second, they provide the ability for the issues being discussed on the site to be syndicated on third party websites. For example, the New York Times might decide to incorporate the top ten national issues on their website; or an individual who blogs on local topics might decide to display the current activity in their area. Freely available data feeds allow individuals and organizations to be continually updated about issues being discussed on Gateway to Gov.

### **Verified Users**

In the interest of insuring the integrity of the forum, we've designed a tiered verification approach that insures are the constituents they claim to be. Unverified users will be permitted to make limited use of the site but their opinions will be marked as unverified. The second level of verification involves proof of physical residency. This verification may be done via a letter sent to their physical mailing address or via a credit card, enabling us to match their name with their physical address. The third level of verification uses vote registration rolls culled from each state directly verify that they are registered voters.

## **CHALLENGES**

### **Diversity of Users**

Gateway to Gov will engage people with a wide range of political and social views. The site will transcend barriers (race, age, gender, class, political affiliation, etc.) that have traditionally inhibited public participation. We hope a wide range of individuals will engage in meaningful discussion of the most pressing issues we face as a society.

### **Critical Mass**

We will use a range of approaches to insure our growth, including two key approaches. First, we will introduce and train existing civic-minded organizations to use the website. Educational materials will be prepared for organizations to distribute to their members. We will explain the purpose of the site and value of promoting it to their members. Secondly, we plan to make full use of the media. A press agent will coordinate meeting with reporters, talk show interviews, etc. Both approaches will be extended to the full spectrum of political and social groups, to insure that all embrace the Gateway to Gov platform.

### **Digital Divide**

In an effort to address the imbalance of access to the internet, we will form partnerships with organizations that are directly addressing this issue. For example, the non-profit Digital Divide Network<sup>iv</sup> is "the Internet's largest community for educators, activists, policy makers and concerned citizens working to bridge the digital divide." By joining this network we will help increase the number of people who can utilize our site. In addition we plan to approach librarians via the American Library Association. Librarians have traditionally been the stewards of public information and we feel that they could play a pivotal role in introducing communities which might not otherwise be engaged.

## **DIRECT NEXT STEPS**

### **Advisory Board**

We have begun to reach out to those actively involved in promoting civic engagement, as well as those with experience designing and developing large-scale web applications. This initial board will be involved in planning and designing the site. Board members will be involved with community outreach and ensuring the organization achieves its core goals. They will also reach out to potential donors and funding sources.

### **Funding Plan**

Our initial funding plan consists of soliciting donations from individuals as well as pursuing grants. We are currently pursuing foundations with programs geared towards enhancing civic engagement, such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, the Town Creek Foundation, The Sunlight Foundation and the Robert R. McCormick Tribune Foundation. We are also pursuing fellowships such as Echoing Green, and have gotten to the second round of their competitive fellowship. Although pursuing foundation grants is important, gifts from individual donors is what will get this project off the ground. We have begun organizing fundraising parties.

### **Design Plans**

Initial funds will fund the creation of an alpha version (an alpha is the first iteration in the development cycle of an interactive website) of the site, which will act as a testing ground, and an interactive demo, which will introduce constituents and elected officials to Gateway to Gov. The second phase involves building a functional beta (second iteration) of the site to iron out the kinks in preparation of the public launch.

### **Publicity and Outreach**

At public launch we will introduce the plan to a diverse group of community leaders and representatives and use media coverage and interviews to get the word out. We will train community liaisons to serve as G2Gov representatives in the field. They will introduce community leaders and elected representatives to the system, providing technical support and assistance to first time users.

## **CONCLUSION**

Thomas Jefferson said, “I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves...” For the first time in history it is technically feasible for the average person to have regular input into the political process. It’s time to utilize modern information technologies to provide a common platform that enhances communication between citizens and their representatives.

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<sup>i</sup> U.S. Census Bureau, “Voting and Registration in the Election of November 2000.” Washington, D.C. February 2002

<sup>ii</sup> ‘Re-invigorating Democratic Participation and Activating an Engaged Citizenry’.

American National Election Study (1958-2002); New York Times/CBS News Polls. July 2003

<sup>iii</sup> Putnam, Robert. Bowling Alone. Simon & Shuster, 2000

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org>