

Top Ten E-Democracy "To Do List" for Governments Around the World

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<http://www.publicus.net>

Democracies Online

<http://www.e-democracy.org/do>

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For the top ten list related to elected officials, see the Top Ten Tips for Weos - Wired Elected Officials.

Governments around the world have an exciting opportunity. We can revitalize our spirit of our many democracies and build an e-government that fundamentally connects with the people and rebuilds the legitimacy of governance. The Internet, if used with democratic intent and spirit can and will bring people closer to their governments. We can break down the "us" versus "them" mentality and embrace the miracle of government as the one institution the people jointly own in their local communities, regions, and nations.

I started to think about these issues when I coordinated the State of Minnesota's government online efforts (1994-1997). Today, I see even more urgency and need for aggressive government-sponsored e-democracy activity in every government office, agency and program. To help us get started I have drafted the "Top Ten E-Democracy "To Do List" for Governments Around the World." It is up to us to:

1. Announce all public meetings online in a systematic and reliable way. Include the time, place, agenda, and information on citizen testimony, participation, or observation options. Use the Internet to build trust in in-person democracy.
2. Put a "Democracy Button" on your site's top page which brings them to a special section detailing the agencies/government units purpose and mission, top decision-makers, links to enabling laws, budget details and other accountability information. Share real information that help a citizen better understand the legitimacy of your government agency and powers. Give citizens real information on how to best influence the policy course of the agency. This could include links to the appropriate parliamentary or local council committees and bodies.

3. Implement "Service Democracy." Yes, most citizens simply want better, more efficient access to service transactions and information products your agency produces. Learn from these relationships. Actively use comment forms, online surveys, citizen focus groups to garner the input required to be a responsive e-government. Don't automate services that people no longer want or need. Use the Internet to learn about what you can do better and not just as a one-way self-service tool designed to limit public interaction and input.

4. End the "Representative Democracy Online Deficit." With the vast majority of government information technology spending focused on the administrative side government, the representative institutions from the local level on up to the Federal government are growing increasingly weak. Invest in the technology and communications infrastructure of those institutions designed to represent the people. Investing in elected officials' voice through technology is investing in the voice of the people. Cynicism aside, options for more direct democracy can be explored, but invest in what we have today - representative democracy.

5. Internet-enable existing representative and advisory processes. Create "Virtual Committee Rooms" and public hearings that allow in-person events to be available in totality via the Internet. Require in-person handouts and testimony to be submitted in HTML for immediate online availability to those watching or listening on the Internet or via broadcasting. Get ready to datacast such items via digital television. Encourage citizens to also testify via the Internet over video conferencing and allow online submission of written testimony. The most sustainable "e-democracy" activities will be those incorporated into existing and legitimate governance processes.

6. Embrace the two-way nature of the Internet. Create the tools required to respond to e-mail in an effective and timely manner. E-mail is the most personal and cherished Internet tool used by the average citizen. How a government deals with incoming e-mail and enables access to automatic informational notices based on citizen preferences will differentiate popular governments from those that are viewed as out of touch. Have a clear e-mail response policy and start by auto-responding with the time and date received, the estimated time for a response, what to do if none is received, and a copy of their original message. Give people the tools to help hold you accountable.

7. Hold government sponsored online consultations. Complement in-person consultations with time-based, asynchronous online events (one to three weeks) that allow people to become educated on public policy issues and interact with agency staff, decision-makers, and each other. Online consultations must be highly structured events designed to have a real impact on the policy process. Don't do this for show. The biggest plus with these kinds of events is that people may participate on their own time from homes, schools, libraries and workplaces and greater diversity of opinions, perspectives, and geography can increase the richness of the policy process. Make clear the government staff response permissions to allow quick responses to informational queries. Have a set process to deal with more controversial topics in a very timely (24-48 hours) fashion with direct responses from decision-makers and top agency staff. Do this right and your agency will want to do this at least quarterly every year,, do it wrong the first time and it will take quarter of a century to build the internal support for another try. Check on the work in Canada, The Netherlands, Sweden and United Kingdom in particular and you'll discover government that are up to some exciting work.

8. Develop e-democracy legislation. Tweak laws and seek the budgetary investments required to support governance in information age. Not everything can be left voluntary – some government entities need a push. What is so important that government must be required to comply? There is a limit to what can be squeezed out of existing budgets. Even with the infrastructure in place the investment in the online writers, communicators, designers, programmers, and facilitators must be increased to make Internet-enhanced democracy something of real value to most citizens and governments alike.

9. Educate elected officials on the use of the Internet in their representative work. Get them set-up technologically and encourage national and international peer-to-peer policy exchanges among representatives and staff. Be careful to prevent use this technology infrastructure for incumbency protection. Have well designed laws or rules to prevent use of technology and information assets in unknown ways. Don't be overly restrictive, but e-mail gathered by an elected official's office shouldn't suddenly be added to a campaign e-mail list. Be sure the tell them to read the "Top Ten Tips for Wired Elected Officials" online at <<http://www.publicus.net/articles/weos.html>>.

10. Create open source democracy online applications. Don't waste tax dollars on unique tools required for common governmental IT and democracy needs. Share your best in-house technology with other governments around the world. Leverage your service infrastructure, be it proprietary or open source, for democratic purposes. With vast resources being spent on making administrative government more efficient, a bit of these resources should be used "inefficiently." Democracy is the inefficiency in decision-making and the exercise of power required for the best public choices and outcomes. Even intentional democratic inefficiency can be made more effective with IT.

In the end, have fun and experiment. Seek out those in other governments who have had practical experience and trade tips along the way. Join the Democracies Online Newswire <<http://www.e-democracy.org/do>> to meet others inside and outside of government who are interested in improving democracy and government through the use of information and communication technologies. Together we can build an e-government fundamentally connected and responsive to the citizens of each of our democracies.