

Politics 2.0: Congress needs to start casting a wider net

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With the advent of the Internet in every part of our lives changing the way we get our news and entertainment, connect with our friends and run our businesses, it's amazing how little America's politicians have taken advantage of it in how they relate to their constituents. Unfortunately, most elected officials in America couldn't tell the difference between a server and a waiter, nor would they know how to use the former to help improve the life of the latter.

According to a new [study](#) conducted by citizen journalists working with the Sunlight Foundation, of the 536 websites maintained by members of Congress, a whopping 499 fail to provide the most basic information to the public about what their representatives in Washington do -- like the name or names of the committees they serve on and the bills they have sponsored. Fewer than half of the members provide the text of or links to statements they've made on the House or Senate floor. Nearly one in four failed to link to any official source of information on their work in Congress. (Full disclosure: We are technology advisers to the Sunlight Foundation.)

If you think that's out of touch, get this: U.S. senators actually still file their campaign finance reports on paper to the FEC, which causes huge and costly delays before the public can find out who is giving them money. Despite having widespread support on the Hill, a bill that would mandate electronic filing of Senate reports, bringing senators in line with their House colleagues, has been blocked twice in recent days with a secret hold by a Republican senator.

Contrast this with our cousins in Britain. For the last decade, an intrepid band of public interest-minded programmers at the nonprofit [mySociety.org](#) has launched an array of sites and tools that are steadily taking hold in the heart of the United Kingdom's parliamentary system.

[TheyWorkForYou.com](#) not only enables Thomas-like searches of parliamentary debates and votes, it also allows site users to add comments everywhere and includes the most recent comments on its front page.

[HearFromYourMP.com](#) makes it easy for constituents from a district to join in a Web-based group dialogue with their member of Parliament. More than 100 members are now participating in such groups.

And last fall, mySociety.org teamed up with Tony Blair's office to launch a [direct petition tool](#) on the prime minister's website. Building on the old British tradition of citizens being able to deliver handwritten petitions to the door of 10 Downing St., the tool invites people to start and join in massive online petition campaigns. The most popular ones are featured prominently on the site, even if they are embarrassing to the government. So far, more than 2.1 million people have signed a petition, with the biggest one focused on opposing a proposed vehicle tax. American politicians should be ashamed that there is nothing like this here.

However, out in the states, some interesting new models are being developed. In Massachusetts, newly elected Gov. Deval Patrick has launched an innovative new website at [myissue.devalpatrick.com](#) that invites citizens to "participate in shaping the direction of your community and Massachusetts" by posting issues that matter and organizing around them. A visitor to the site immediately sees a list of issues ranging from equal marriage rights to making renewable energy work, to an unresolved corrections officers' contract, all ranked numerically by how many votes they've received from site visitors.

In just a few weeks, with little publicity, more than 4,000 people have created accounts and added their voices to the site. On several of the featured issues, Patrick has responded with

detailed policy proposals, and the site shows dozens of pages of comments on them. It's reminiscent of Utah state Rep. Steve Urquhart's legislative wiki, Politicopia.com, which we covered in a column earlier this year.

What both these experiments have in common is that they are using the latest Web technology to invite direct participation by ordinary constituents in what until now has been a process dominated by lobbyists and interest groups.

For far too long, Americans have been telling pollsters that they feel disconnected from the political process. Patrick and Urquhart are proving that information technology and the Web can produce a less top-down and more robust participatory democracy. Hopefully their peers in Washington and the rest of the country will join them soon.

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