Digital Democracy

The moment President Abraham Lincoln delivered his remarks on the battlefield at Gettysburg, his vision of “government of the people, by the people and for the people” became a cherished American ideal. Here in California, a century and a half later, however, realities of the legislative process create distance between citizens and their leaders. In fact, the lack of transparency in state government cripples efforts to promote both civic engagement and political accountability.

The Digital Democracy project is designed to change that.

The Challenge

Every year, 120 full-time lawmakers and more than 2,200 staff gather in Sacramento to craft policies that guide the state’s 38 million residents and the world’s 8th largest economy. These lawmakers introduce an average of 5,000 bills each legislative session, making key decisions impacting the state’s $120 billion budget and creating a booming industry for 1,100 registered lobbyists.

In today’s technology-driven environment, it’s surprisingly difficult to gain visibility into legislative processes. California does not produce transcripts that capture testimony of debate and negotiations among lawmakers, lobbyists, committee staff and stakeholders. And while a majority of hearings are audio or video recorded, multimedia archives are unsearchable and difficult to access, even for the most sophisticated researchers.

Static, before-and-after snapshots are produced: the print version of a bill, the committee analyses and the final votes. It’s easy to learn what happened, but understanding how or why is another matter. The news media, interest groups, the general public and other legislators have virtually no way to know how sessions unfolded, including who requested amendments, whether commitments were made and honored and when financial relationships or special interests may have influenced outcomes.

For these reasons, California continues to rank among the worst states in terms of government transparency.
The Solution

The Digital Democracy project virtually opens the doors of the state legislature, providing Californians unprecedented access to the workings of their government. Members of the media, non-profit organizations, watchdog groups and other special interests—along with scholars, researchers and average citizens—will gain powerful, actionable insight into the processes that create new laws.

The Digital Democracy project will deliver a first-of-its-kind online, searchable database of all California Assembly and Senate committees and floor hearings, enabling a user to search video archives by keyword, topic, speaker or date. Through advanced software technology, inventories of dense, static vote counts and amendments will give way to interactive multimedia files that bring the lawmaking process to life.

In addition, the Digital Democracy project will incorporate sophisticated campaign contribution data from MapLight, tracking monetary exchanges between special interests and lawmakers as legislation is crafted and voted on. Citizens will be able to explore financial relationships between people by proximity in time to votes, and between industries and legislative voting patterns.

While state-of-the-art database software and key campaign contribution data will enable new insight, emerging technologies will encourage information sharing. The Digital Democracy project will incorporate connections to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and other social media platforms.

Transparency

Digital Democracy improves transparency in government in a number of ways. The system will push beyond the technical challenges of merely providing access to the results of legislative proceedings. It will offer direct, full, unfettered insight into the content of legislative hearings, complete with full search capabilities covering profiles of those who speak at hearings—legislators, lobbyists, witnesses and citizens—and subject matter such as bills and policy agenda items.

Digital Democracy will also analyze transcripts of hearings and provide ways to track the positions and affinities of legislators and lobbyists. Using the system, interested parties will be able to see how discussions at committee hearings impact changes to bills on the table.

Augmented by the key campaign contribution information provided by MapLight, the Digital Democracy project will assist the media and other watchdog groups in tracking, examining and reporting on the work of the legislature. Equally important, it will give citizens a new way to interact with their representatives and hold them accountable.
Civic Engagement
The Digital Democracy project is designed to be both simple and powerful. The system will fit the needs of seasoned journalists and public policy professionals as well as citizens simply interested in learning more about their representative’s actions.

Video clips will serve as dynamic content for grassroots mobilizers, online media outlets, bloggers, professional associations and government watchdogs. The public will easily be able to search, locate, view, clip and share information through social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Google+ and others.

The resulting heightened level of engagement on the part of professionals and lay people alike will inspire the general public to become better informed about the workings of their state government and get involved.

Project Leaders
The Digital Democracy project was launched by Dr. Sam Blakeslee, a former California State Senator and the Founding Director of the Cal Poly Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy (IATPP), and IATPP Associate Director Christine Robertson, a former Chief of Staff in the California Assembly and Senate. Building on extensive practical experience with constituent relations and public policy development, Blakeslee and Robertson believe that easy-to-use searchable databases that offer relevant information and connect with social media tools are key to moving the public’s relationship with the legislature from “citizen hobby” to “citizen empowerment.”

TARGETS: The Digital Democracy system will become a powerful resource for a variety of individuals and groups. Targets include:

• General public - For California residents and other individuals interested in the state’s legislative process and specific policy issues, the Digital Democracy project will provide a rich source of information in an easy-to-use system.

• Media - As the Capitol press corps continues to shrink, journalists are no longer able to be on site regularly to capture testimony and debates unfolding in committee hearings. This critical watchdog feature of journalism will be reinvigorated as Digital Democracy enables reporters to quickly and remotely scan hearings by speaker or keyword, honing in on newsworthy moments.

• Interest groups/non-profit organizations - Employees and affiliates of groups and organizations involved in public policy debates will use the Digital Democracy system to track the legislative process, assess the positions of individual legislators and stakeholders and research the effects of witness testimony on legislation and lawmaker opinions. They will also be better positioned to communicate important issues to their supporters—a critical feature of grassroots efforts to promote political participation.

• Legislators and their staff - Many legislative offices struggle to create ways to communicate with and motivate those affected by policies being crafted in the legislature. Lawmakers and their staff will utilize the Digital Democracy system to improve communication with voters and key stakeholders by providing quick updates on debates affecting various constituencies.

The Digital Democracy project will also have a positive impact on keeping those involved in the legislative process honest. Capitol insiders will use the system to ensure commitments made during negotiations are kept, and they will also be empowered to discover misrepresentations and dishonest dealings. Improved prospects for enforcing compromises and applying political penalties will elevate the tenor of California politics.

• Public policy researchers and scholars - Political scientists and sociologists will use the Digital Democracy system to examine the progression of public policy debates on various issues within the state legislature, track the history of special interest influence and analyze the work of committees and individual legislators.
About The Institute

The Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy opened its doors at Cal Poly in 2012. Founded and directed by former State Senator Sam Blakeslee, the mission of the non-partisan, interdisciplinary organization is to develop practical solutions to societal issues by informing and driving public policy through advanced technology. Teams of Cal Poly faculty and students, together with public policy leaders and industry experts, create and promote answers to some of the world’s most intractable challenges in areas such as the environment, energy, agriculture, natural resources and government. The Institute began its work by developing three core projects in the areas of government reform, education and energy. These projects are designed to highlight Cal Poly’s unique Learn by Doing approach to problem solving, showcase the Institute’s versatility and provide concrete examples of the type of innovative public policy work that can be undertaken at Cal Poly. Additionally, the Institute has created an advisory board of highly respected leaders with deep expertise in the policy areas that are the current focus of Institute programs and projects.

The non-partisan, self-supporting Institute for Advanced Technology & Public Policy creates unique educational experiences that provide world-class learning and research opportunities for Cal Poly students and faculty. The Institute also showcases the University’s ability to constructively engage on policy issues facing California. The highest principles of academic freedom guide the Institute’s programs.