

# Open Government

## Assessing the Obama Administration's Efforts To Make Government Transparency a Reality

**Author**  
Paul Johnston

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#### Introduction

One of Barack Obama's first actions as U.S. president was signing a memorandum on transparent government. "My administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government," he declared. "We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration."<sup>1</sup>

President Obama justified his commitment to transparent government in terms of democracy, efficiency, and effectiveness. His argument was that transparency gives citizens greater insight into what their representatives and institutions are doing, and provides them with the information they need to hold public bodies accountable. Increased openness is also intended to encourage public institutions and public servants to perform at the highest standards, while allowing citizens to contribute more to public sector goals.

This is an attractive vision, but realizing an open government is a complex task. Prior to his election, Obama demonstrated an unsurpassed ability to use the Internet for political campaigning, but would he show the same sure touch in bringing Web 2.0 into the White House? While it is too soon to provide a definitive answer, it is well worth exploring the many initiatives he launched in this area in the first year of his administration.

This paper, from the Cisco® Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG) Public Sector Practice, analyzes the three main aspects of the Obama administration's open government agenda—transparency, public participation, and collaboration—and assesses lessons that can be learned from activities the administration has undertaken in these areas.

#### Transparency

One of President Obama's first priorities was restoring growth to the U.S. economy; the unprecedented economic stimulus package that he and his administration created was a natural test bed for his commitment to government transparency. Legislation supporting the stimulus package required a board of directors, whose purpose was not just to hold recipients accountable for how funds were used, but to establish and maintain "a user-friendly, public-facing website to foster greater accountability and transparency" in relation to stimulus funding.

The result was Recovery.gov, an official U.S. government website that provides access to data related to funds spent under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. Worth \$787 billion, the Recovery Act is an economic stimulus package intended to ignite the U.S. economy in the wake of the economic downturn.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/)

## Recovery.gov: A Test Case for Transparency

Recovery.gov not only tracks Recovery Act spending—it also allows for the reporting of potential fraud, waste, and abuse. Publicity surrounding Recovery.gov had a significant impact on encouraging a wide range of public sector agencies not only to make more information available about spending plans,<sup>2</sup> but also to involve citizens in spending-related decisions. In one example, the state of Virginia created a site<sup>3</sup> where citizens could contribute ideas on funding. The site received more than 9,000 project proposals over a four-week period. In another example, the city of Santa Cruz, California created a forum on its website where citizens could suggest, rate, and comment on savings proposals.<sup>4</sup>

While Recovery.gov had a positive impact on other public sector agencies, it faced a number of implementation challenges.

### Getting Started

The U.S. federal stimulus package was intended to help the ailing economy recover quickly. Nonetheless, the process of allocating funds took time—it wasn't until September 2009, six months after legislation was enacted, that a significant amount of economic stimulus data became available. Furthermore, tracking stimulus spending and making the information publicly available in a way that is easily understood has proven challenging.

Initially, Recovery.gov was outperformed by a private sector site, Recovery.org,<sup>5</sup> which was developed by Onvia, a Seattle-based company that compiles bid solicitations from all levels of government to sell to vendors and contractors for a subscription fee. Criticism of Recovery.gov appeared in *The Washington Post* in May 2009: "A visitor looking for what's going on in, say, Virginia can find nearly 150 specific stimulus projects that have been posted for bids in that state, whereas a visitor to Recovery.gov's Virginia page sees only the general program-by-program allocations."<sup>6</sup>

### Limitations

Recovery.gov is fairly easy to use and contains visual tools such as clickable maps, but there are significant limitations when it comes to analyzing the data. For example, identifying which projects have been undertaken, by which federal agency, and in which state is easy. Determining which private sector contractors were the biggest beneficiaries of stimulus funding, or comparing how similar contractors fared in different states or in relation to different types of contracts, however, is more difficult. One reason is that the United States, like most countries, has several layers of government, and pulling together data clearly and consistently across different tiers is a huge challenge, primarily because the data-collection systems and the culture needed to deliver the data have not been established. In the future, public sector organizations will need to ensure that their approach to data collection is consistent with that of other public sector organizations collecting similar or related data.

<sup>2</sup> For examples, go to [http://www.recovery.pa.gov/portal/server.pt/community/recovery\\_pa\\_gov/5994](http://www.recovery.pa.gov/portal/server.pt/community/recovery_pa_gov/5994) or <http://www.recovery.ny.gov/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://stimulus.virginia.gov/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://budget.santacruzcityca.gov/how-you-can-help>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.recovery.org/home.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/20/AR2009052003535.html>

Another challenge arises from subcontracting, since transparency into the details of how the money is being used may not extend beyond the contract with the prime contractor.

### Citizen Engagement

Recovery.gov is intended not just to tell citizens how their money is being spent, but to encourage them to take action to ensure that stimulus funding is being spent in the best possible way. Accordingly, the site provides information for potential whistle-blowers and electronic and phone hotlines where citizens can report illegal or questionable activities.

Recovery.gov also encourages citizens to analyze data and share their analyses with the site's board of directors. This capability, however, seems underdeveloped. It is unclear what the board expects the public to do, and the site does not provide evidence of how citizens are using the data.

It is too early to assess the full impact of Recovery.gov. It is likely, though, that this project will transform expectations of how much financial data the public sector should make available and how this should be done. Meeting these expectations will be challenging. The public sector will need to develop a consistent approach (and standards) across organizations and different tiers of government if an accurate, easy-to-analyze view is to be made available to citizens.

### Transparency: The Bigger Picture

Recovery.gov is a groundbreaking attempt by the Obama administration to make government more transparent. Simply making financial data more available to the public, however, is not enough. A larger part of the administration's agenda is to provide further information on how public organizations work and, particularly, how decisions are made—this is the essence of transparency.

The administration has taken some steps in this direction. For example, it agreed to post records of White House visitors online.<sup>7</sup> This decision, however, came about as part of a deal with a nonprofit organization that started a legal case, arguing that the United States Secret Service had an obligation to release visitor logs under the U.S. Department of State Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Campaigners argued that the administration's solution—the voluntary release of information according to rules set by the White House—was an inferior outcome of the White House agreeing that these logs were indeed covered by FOIA regulations.

In a more significant move, the administration decided to impose strict transparency requirements in relation to stimulus spending.<sup>8</sup> For example, any comments by registered lobbyists on specific projects, applications, or applicants must be in writing and, once received, the relevant public sector organization must post them publically on its recovery website within three business days.

Regarding general issues, registered lobbyists are allowed to communicate orally with public officials. These officials, however, are obliged to document in writing, either

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Statement-from-the-President-on-the-First-Time-Disclosure-Policy-for-White-House-Visitor-Logs/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Statement-from-the-President-on-the-First-Time-Disclosure-Policy-for-White-House-Visitor-Logs/).

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Memorandum-for-the-Heads-of-Executive-Departments-and-Agencies-3-20-09/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Memorandum-for-the-Heads-of-Executive-Departments-and-Agencies-3-20-09/)

contemporaneously or immediately thereafter, the 1) date and time of the contact, 2) name of the registered lobbyist and official between whom the contact took place, and 3) a short description of the substance of the communication. This document then must be posted publicly by the executive department or agency on its recovery website within three business days of the communication.

This example demonstrates the Obama administration's interest in broadening its transparency agenda to cover all aspects of the public sector decision-making process. The administration, however, has yet to articulate a comprehensive vision of how this might work in relation to all issues and for all public sector organizations. Furthermore, its efforts have not met the expectations of the most passionate advocates. Dan Froomkin, former columnist for *The Washington Post*, wrote on November 25, 2008:<sup>9</sup>

“Imagine a White House website where the home page isn't just a static collection of transcripts and press releases, but a window into the roiling intellectual foment of the West Wing. Imagine a White House website where staffers maintain blogs in which they write about who they are and what they are working on; where some meetings are streamed in live video; where the president's daily calendar is posted online; where major policy proposals have public collaborative workspaces or wikis; where progress towards campaign promises is tracked on a daily basis; and where anyone can sign up for customized updates by email, text message, RSS feed, Twitter, or the social network of their choice.

“And that's just for starters, because the Internet doesn't look kindly on information that just flows one way. To live up to their promises, the president and his staff are going to have to do more than just talk—they're going to have to listen, and respond. So, imagine a website where the president regularly answers questions sent in by citizens; where ordinary people can vote up or down items they want brought to the president's attention; and where Americans from across the political spectrum engage in honest debate.”

Froomkin's vision of unlimited transparency ignores the burden—in terms of time and effort—that this scenario would impose on the White House (or on any other public institution). Furthermore, Froomkin fails to recognize that all organizations need some confidential space for internal discussion. His comments do, however, highlight the need for more government transparency. As the Obama administration's limited efforts have illustrated, there is plenty of room for government action—in relation to both the context of decision making (Who met whom? What inputs were received?) and the decision-making process (What were the key stages of the process? Which criteria were used to make decisions?).

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<sup>9</sup> Dan Froomkin is deputy editor of *NiemanWatchdog.org*. To read his November 25, 2008 column in its entirety, go to <http://www.niemanwatchdog.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=background.view&backgroundid=00307>

## Transparency: Lessons Learned

The transparency agenda requires a firm commitment from the top; ideally, transparency should be an explicit requirement for all public sector organizations. President Obama used an executive memorandum to drive this agenda, but a legal or quasi-legal directive might have been more effective.

Drafting detailed transparency requirements that deliver appropriate results across the full range of public sector organizations is probably an impossible task. Progress depends on the emergence of best practices. Central government can speed up the process by publishing guidelines and highlighting innovative and successful models. This is a general approach the Obama administration is taking via the Open Government Innovations Gallery, which showcases initiatives from a wide range of U.S. public sector organizations.<sup>10</sup>

The commitment to transparency could be further strengthened by creating processes that enable citizens to highlight cases where they question the level of openness of public sector organizations. Initially, such challenges could be addressed by the organization concerned. Ultimately, however, citizens could be given the right to appeal to a “transparency czar”—an independent arbiter with the authority to intervene and decide whether the request for additional transparency is justified. The role would be similar to that of an “information commissioner.”<sup>11</sup>

## Public Participation

### Change.gov: From Campaigning to Governing

Mass participation was a hallmark of Barack Obama’s presidential campaign. Even before his inauguration, Obama sought to apply techniques used in his campaign to his transition to the White House. Obama’s Change.gov portal<sup>12</sup> offered citizens various channels through which to participate:

- **The Citizen’s Briefing Book:** Enabled citizens to submit their top concerns to the incoming president’s agenda and let others comment and vote on various suggestions.
- **Join the Discussion:** Allowed members of Obama’s transition team to give their perspectives on an issue and ask for feedback.
- **Your Seat at the Table:** Provided information on who was meeting with the transition team and allowed individuals and organizations to comment or offer relevant information for the meetings.
- **Open for Questions:** Allowed citizens to submit questions to the transition team and then rank those questions; the most highly rated questions were answered by the team via videos.
- **It’s Your America:** Encouraged citizens to submit stories about their experiences (good or bad) and suggest changes they would like to see the government implement.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.whitehouse.gov/open/innovations/>

<sup>11</sup> Examples include the Information Commissioner’s Office in the United Kingdom, which promotes public access to official information and protects personal information.

<sup>12</sup> <http://change.gov/content/home>

These channels generated strong public response. Approximately 125,000 people participated in the Citizen's Briefing Book, submitting 44,000 ideas and casting 1.4 million votes.<sup>13</sup> In the first round of Open for Questions, 20,000 participants submitted 10,000 questions and cast 1 million votes. In the second round, these numbers increased to 103,512, 76,031, and 4,713,083, respectively.<sup>14</sup>

Change.gov was not a unanimous success, however, and raised a number of challenges.

### Securing the Right Kind of Participation

Groups strongly committed to a particular cause may put extensive effort into influencing the outcome, which can produce misleading results. For example, the Citizen's Briefing Book suggested that legalizing marijuana was one of the first things people wanted President Obama to do. This raises the general issue of representativeness. While a considerable number of people took the trouble to participate, it is not clear that their views accurately reflected public opinion. As one academic noted, "Since the top-rated education idea was age-appropriate sex education and the highest-ranked health proposal was in support of medical marijuana, it's fair to suspect that conservatives were not heavily represented in the participation base."<sup>15</sup>

### Knowing the Impact

Perhaps the biggest issue is assessing what difference all this activity made. Unless the impact of the activity is clear, determining how to sustain it may be difficult. President Obama's election was a historic event that touched many people, but what chance is there of sustaining people's willingness to commit time and energy to participating if, six months later, the impact is hard to assess?

### Choosing the Best Process

Change.gov encountered some typical dilemmas that arise in designing participation initiatives. For example, citizens were able to submit and vote on ideas over the same time period for many of the initiatives. This made sense in terms of maximizing participation, since anyone visiting the site could either submit an idea, vote, or do both. The drawback of doing both at the same time, however, is that ideas submitted early on have an unfair advantage (referred to as "early submission bias"). Once an idea gathers votes, it gains visibility and is perceived as popular. Because of this, the idea has a bigger chance of continuing to be among the highest-ranked suggestions.

### Moderating Participation

The issue of moderation is a difficult one. In the absence of moderation, the wording of suggestions may be unclear or there may be various, apparently similar ideas. In the latter

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<sup>13</sup> "Promising Practices in Online Engagement," Scott Bittle, Chris Haller, and Alison Kadlec, Center for Advances in Public Engagement, No. 3, 2009,

[http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA\\_CAPE\\_Paper3\\_Promising\\_Mech2.pdf](http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA_CAPE_Paper3_Promising_Mech2.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> [http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/open\\_for\\_questions\\_round\\_2\\_response/](http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/open_for_questions_round_2_response/)

<sup>15</sup> "Promising Practices in Online Engagement," Scott Bittle, Chris Haller, and Alison Kadlec, Center for Advances in Public Engagement, No. 3, page 5, 2009,

[http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA\\_CAPE\\_Paper3\\_Promising\\_Mech2.pdf](http://www.publicagenda.org/files/pdf/PA_CAPE_Paper3_Promising_Mech2.pdf)



case, it may be difficult to judge whether votes for similar-sounding ideas should or shouldn't be combined to determine a final ranking.

Likewise, in the absence of moderation, some contributions to discussions may be off-topic or inappropriate. If public officials do moderate, however, their intervention may generate arguments or look like an attempt to manipulate the outcome.

Moderation was not an option in the case of Change.gov because the administration sought (and, to some extent, secured) large-scale participation. Moderating citizen input would have been highly resource-intensive, slowing discussions and affecting citizens' experience (for example, if input had to await moderation before it was displayed on the website). In this type of situation, moderating by "community" would have been an effective solution. While this approach was not used for Change.gov projects, it has been employed for subsequent Obama administration initiatives.<sup>16</sup>

### Deciding Who Can Play

Change.gov also raised the issue of who should be allowed to participate in the decision-making process, and on what basis. When government is looking for good ideas, it would seem natural to accept contributions from anyone. Once online voting is introduced (which suggests a meaningful level of support for an idea), not knowing who is voting may become an issue—perhaps a small number of people are voting many times, or maybe a significant number of people voting or even submitting ideas live outside the relevant jurisdiction.

Obama's transition team decided not to limit participation on Change.gov. This decision is understandable for two reasons. First, the results from citizen input were not binding—for instance, while voting to legalize marijuana ranked high, the proposal has not become a priority of the administration. Second, controlling who could contribute would have been difficult, discouraging mass participation.

A related issue is whether anonymous contributions should be allowed. Doing so maximizes participation, but may increase the number of inappropriate comments and allow for "sock puppeting"—people seeking to generate an illusion of support for their views by backing them with a string of separate contributions from apparently different people. For transparency advocates, requiring people to identify themselves is a matter of principle. If the aim is to encourage open public debate, how can it be achieved with tools that allow anonymity?

### Involving Citizens in Public Sector Decision Making

After his inauguration, President Obama continued to explore ways of enabling the public to influence public sector decision making. For example, when the administration recognized that it needed help in designing Recovery.gov, it launched "A National Dialogue,"<sup>17</sup> an online platform designed to encourage nationwide discussions on ideas, tools, and approaches required to increase the success of Recovery.gov. Dialogue, which was organized by the National Academy of Public Administration, took place on an easy-to-use platform where

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<sup>16</sup> Community moderation takes place on the Office of Science & Technology Policy blog, where readers can flag comments as off-topic and, therefore, have them removed from discussions. <http://blog.ostp.gov/flagged-comments/2009-06-04/>

<sup>17</sup> [www.thenationaldialogue.org](http://www.thenationaldialogue.org)



people could suggest, comment on, and rate ideas. The platform incorporated Really Simple Syndication (RSS) technology and a variety of interesting capabilities, such as notification when a registered participant posted content to the site. As ideas came in, they were posted under three tabs: “Latest,” “Highest rated,” and “Most comments” (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. A National Dialogue: Ideas that Received the Most Comments

The screenshot shows the 'A National Dialogue' website interface. The header includes the logo and the text 'RECOVERY DIALOGUE: INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SOLUTIONS' with a search bar. Below the header, there are navigation tabs for 'All ideas', 'Learn about the issues', and 'About the Dialogue'. The main content area is filtered to show 'Most comments'. Three ideas are listed:

- ONLINE BUSINESS PLAN AND DUE DILIGENCE REPORTING SYSTEM AND DATA STORAGE**: Submitted by: fundingroadmap. 62 comments | This idea is now closed - view comments. Number of stars: 4 based on 52 votes.
- Online cascading performance budgets and performance reports**: Submitted by: Strategisys. 49 comments | This idea is now closed - view comments. Number of stars: 3 based on 16 votes.
- Tracking through Google Earth and web cam**: Submitted by: loriscott. 45 comments | This idea is now closed - view comments. Number of stars: 3 based on 39 votes.

On the right side, there is a 'Jump into the discussion' section with a question: 'What is one system that has worked well for you in managing diverse types and sources of data? Why?'. Below this is a video player showing a man speaking, with a progress bar at 0:00 / 3:34. At the bottom right, there is a 'Discussion topics' section with the text 'collaboration data'.

Source: National Academy of Public Administration, 2009

The “Most comments” tab may have been intended to draw people’s attention to ideas that had generated the liveliest debates. While this approach was innovative, it may have led some people to make comments simply as a way of giving greater prominence to a particular idea. In any event, the two ideas that received the most comments were about products submitted by their creators, with many brief, supportive comments rather than genuine discussion.

A National Dialogue also shows the drawback of ranking ideas in terms of the average rating received: the top-rated ideas received full marks, but only from one or two people. A formula combining average rating with a weighting for the number of people who rated the idea might have been a better solution. The best way to combine these two factors is a matter of judgment; an idea that was highly rated by a large number of people should probably be given more weight than one that was highly rated by a handful of people, even if the average rating is slightly higher in the latter case.

## The Open Government Initiative

The Obama administration's open government initiative is a significant attempt to involve citizens in the policymaking process. It was developed in three phases:

1. **Brainstorming:** Users posted and voted on ideas at IdeaScale.com.<sup>18</sup>
2. **Discussions:** Emerging conclusions were discussed on the "Office of Science & Technology Policy, Executive Office of the President" blog.<sup>19</sup>
3. **Drafting:** Detailed policy statements on aspects of the open government agenda were developed on Mixedink.com, a web-based tool that enables people to write documents collaboratively and vote on their preferred version.

Public participation in these three activities was significant, but less than that achieved through the Change.gov projects. The Brainstorming phase elicited more than 900 ideas and 33,000 votes. The Discussion phase attracted more than 1,000 comments in response to 16 topics. The Drafting phase produced 305 drafts by 375 authors, with 2,256 people voting on those drafts.<sup>20</sup> These lower numbers probably reflect the fact that these three phases took longer to complete and were more complicated than any of the projects undertaken during Obama's campaign. This increased complexity resulted from the objective to use these activities to help develop concrete policy proposals, rather than simply providing general input into the new administration's programs.

Ironically, criticisms of the three-phased process surfaced in a collaboratively written document that was successful in the drafting phase:

"We believe it is unwise to attempt to develop policy proposals on a complicated subject, such as e-rulemaking through the equivalent of policy sound bites as afforded by this wiki experiment. Doing so often reduces important subjects into rhetorical commentary, particularly when a thoughtful report on policy solutions already exists. An alternative approach would be to post the ABA recommendations in order to seek comments using new media as a vehicle. This may produce more thoughtful reaction and commentary to considered recommendations, thereby advancing policy directions for e-rulemaking."<sup>21</sup>

While this statement may, in part, be a criticism of the Mixedink tool, it suggests some frustration with an unstructured debate. While it is important for governments to involve citizens in the policymaking process, they must take some responsibility for structuring and organizing the discussion. In particular, there is a need to highlight hard choices and trade-offs; so far, only a limited number of online tools have been tested. It will be interesting to see which new tools (if any) the Obama administration develops over the next few years.

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ideascale.com/>

<sup>19</sup> <http://blog.ostp.gov/category/opengov/page/2/>

<sup>20</sup> <http://blog.ostp.gov/category/opengov/>

<sup>21</sup> <http://mixedink.com/OpenGov/ERulemaking>

## Public Participation: The Next Level

Building deeper citizen engagements around more advanced online tools would help counter criticisms that the administration's efforts to date have generated only superficial public engagement. It is true that deeper citizen engagement will require more time and effort from participants. Therefore, a smaller number of participants are expected. It might be possible to get large numbers of people to rate, in order of preference, 1) a \$100 million increase in taxes, 2) a \$100 million cut in public services, and 3) a combined \$50 million increase in taxes and \$50 million cut in public services. Fewer people, however, are likely to get involved in discussing the details of what each of these changes might involve.

Linking specific open government initiatives to a long-term process is also important when addressing public participation. Large-scale participation is a worthy goal, but the aim should be to develop a long-term relationship with the public, rather than to solicit single bursts of activity. Governments should build into their initiatives opportunities for citizens to register for updates on developments in a particular area. This could happen in a number of ways. For instance, subscribers could sign up on a mailing list or join an online forum that uses RSS feeds to keep them abreast of next steps. Or, citizens could continue debates or discussions via a government blog—the Digital Britain Forum in the United Kingdom is one example.<sup>22</sup>

It is also important to recognize that public participation is not just about getting more ideas. If governments want to achieve maximum benefit from public input, they must think more broadly about *how* the public can contribute. Public participation can provide:

- Ideas policymakers had missed or not considered
- Clearer insight into:
  - Public viewpoints on priorities and trade-offs
  - How people might react to a policy change—that is, whether they are likely to respond as expected to new incentives/deterrents
  - Real-world impacts of policy changes
- Suggested improvements to designing policy packages to counter any impacts that policymakers may have missed or underestimated

Furthermore, for effective participation, government must clearly state which stage the policy process has reached. For example, a simple framework might include four stages:

1. **Defining the problem:** What is the case for policy actions?
2. **Generating ideas for solutions:** Which actions are required to deliver the policy objectives identified in Stage 1?
3. **Assessing priorities and trade-offs:** How can the actions identified in Stage 2 be combined in one package? Given resource constraints, what is the impact of one proposal on others, and how do specific actions affect other policy objectives?
4. **Getting implementation right:** What is the best way to implement the chosen set of policy proposals?

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<sup>22</sup> The Digital Britain Forum was set up after the publication of the *Digital Britain Report*, in June 2009, to continue discussions in an active and, sometimes, frank manner (<http://digitalbritainforum.org.uk/>).

This type of framework would help policymakers decide which type of public participation opportunity to offer (since different approaches make sense at different stages of the policymaking process), while helping citizens understand how a particular engagement opportunity fits into the policy process and exactly what sort of input government is seeking. Adopting this kind of approach might also encourage policymakers to be more forthcoming about which topics are up for discussion and which are not—for example, objectives could be up for discussion in Stage 1 but not in later stages.

Representativeness is, perhaps, the most controversial aspect of any government's efforts to involve the public in the policymaking process. Combining discussions on- and offline is one way to minimize this issue. For instance, face-to-face consultation on a policy can be continued through online dialogue, or the results of an online activity can be shared face-to-face to see whether, or to what extent, the same results emerge.

It is also important to remember that online participation is usually about improving the decision-making process, rather than transferring decision-making power to the small percentage of citizens who can and do participate. Ultimately, elected representatives are accountable for the policy decisions they make, and those decisions will be affected by input from a wide range of sources. In addition to online participation activities, representatives will be influenced by direct contact with constituents, views from interested parties, or public opinion via the media.

Finding realistic ways for governments to share with citizens the impacts of their participation is a significant issue. For example, how do governments let citizens know that their opinions had an effect on governments' decisions? One problem is that if government engages the public with an "open mind" and then seeks nonaggregated input—that is, simply asks for comments and suggestions—it is almost impossible to demonstrate the impact of the suggestions. A braver step would be for government to share its analysis of—and proposed solution for—an issue, allowing citizens to rate them against other possibilities. In this way, it would be much clearer whether, and for which issues, public participation had an impact.

### **Public Participation: Lessons Learned**

President Obama's open government initiative shows that it *is* possible to get large numbers of citizens involved not just in the policymaking process, but also in making high-quality contributions.

Governing, however, is very different from campaigning, and individual exercises must be viewed in a long-term context. Governments should ask themselves: Where does this exercise fit in the policy process? What is the participation strategy for the whole policy process in relation to the issue?

Participation initiatives should also provide citizens with opportunities for long-term engagement, rather than for single activities, to increase their chances for success. The fundamental issue, however, is demonstrating to citizens that their input had an impact. The Obama administration has not had any breakthroughs yet in this area.

Governments should also explore more advanced tools and techniques for getting citizen input on policy priorities and trade-offs. This will enable citizens to be involved not just in

generating ideas, but also in the most difficult aspect of policy work: assessing which combination of measures will have the most favorable impact.

## Collaboration

Collaboration, the third aspect of the open government initiative, focuses on actively engaging Americans in the work of government. The administration's transparency and participation programs contribute to this goal, but the memorandum on open government calls for more: it implies that public sector organizations must collaborate more effectively and that citizens should collaborate in the delivery of public services.

While few collaboration initiatives are directly associated with the White House, a number of projects in this area are highlighted on the administration's Open Government Innovations Gallery. One initiative relates to the creation of a government-moderated virtual community for small businesses; another is a discussion forum where teachers can help the National Archives and Records Administration design a website on how to use primary resources in the classroom; the third highlights a tool for sharing information in the defense community about science and technology projects; and the fourth initiative is a competition in which people submit ideas for solving a development challenge identified by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID).

While these four initiatives embrace the web's ability to engage more people in contributing to a particular goal, they are relatively small-scale. So far, the Obama administration does not seem to have developed a strategy either for transforming collaboration within and among public sector organizations, or for encouraging citizen involvement in the actual delivery of public services.

There is one area of collaboration, however, where the administration is making strides.

### **Data.gov: Collaborating with Citizens To Maximize the Value of Public Data**

Enabling citizens to become actively involved in maximizing the value of public information is one area where the Obama administration has made some progress. Through Data.gov, citizens can work together on creating the best possible tools for using government data. The site is designed to give the public access to "high-value, machine-readable data sets" generated by the executive branch of the U.S. federal government.

Data.gov was developed by Vivek Kundra, the man President Obama appointed chief information officer of the United States. Kundra built his reputation in the District of Columbia, where he was instrumental in the data catalog project that made available hundreds of data sets in a range of formats designed to encourage people to develop related applications. Kundra also launched the "Apps for Democracy" competition, to challenge citizens to submit ideas for new applications using public data.

Kundra moved quickly to replicate this achievement at the federal level through Data.gov. The site offers data in three ways: through the "Raw" Data Catalog, the Tool Catalog, and the Geodata Catalog.<sup>23</sup> Each data set displays additional metadata for that data set. For example, the "Raw" Data Catalog provides an instant download of machine-readable, platform-independent data sets, while the Tools Catalog provides hyperlinks that may lead to agency

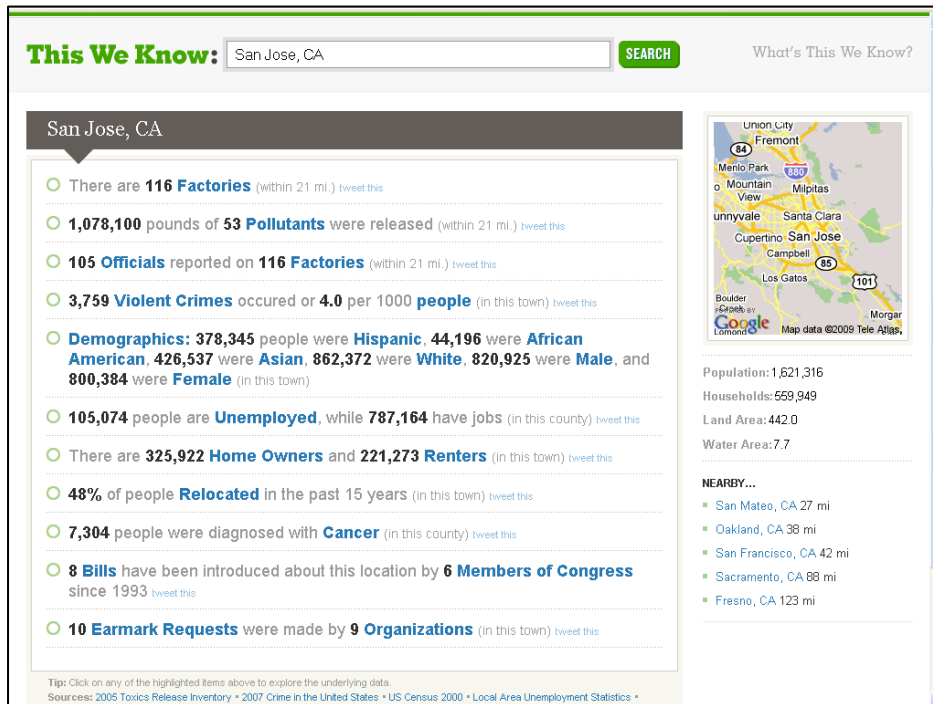
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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.data.gov>

tools or agency webpages, allowing users to mine data sets.<sup>24</sup> Users can also rate the data sets and tools.

Data.gov is simple to use, and a number of innovative applications such as Thisweknow.org have been built using the platform. The site enables citizens to enter a U.S. city to retrieve a summary of public data related to that location. From there, they can drill down into the individual data sets. Figure 2 shows the results from a particular search on a U.S. city.

Figure 2. Details on the City of San Jose, California



Source: Thisweknow.org, 2009

Although the initial launch of Data.gov provided a limited range of federal data sets, the public was invited to shape its future by suggesting additional data sets, among other possible enhancements. One improvement to the site would be greater transparency in relation to requests for additional data sets. At the moment, the site includes a simple form for citizens to fill out; a published list of the requested data sets and the ability to allow people to endorse those requests by others or, at least, to prioritize them would be useful.

## Collaboration: Lessons Learned and Potential Next Steps

Unlike transparency and public participation, collaboration is harder to drive from the top. There are some valuable examples of collaboration such as those highlighted on the Open Government Innovations Gallery, but the White House has not identified any flagship initiatives that demonstrate the power of collaborative government.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.data.gov/catalog/raw>



Data.gov is a partial exception to this claim, although its focus is highly specialized. It is a successful undertaking that serves as an example of collaboration and as a valuable model U.S. states and other jurisdictions are copying and developing. By encouraging public collaboration, Data.gov generates citizen-friendly applications and other uses for data—uses that public servants otherwise may have missed. Over time, however, added value created by citizens should come not just from new applications, but also from feedback and, hence, from improvements to the data sets.

The administration's challenge is to extend the Data.gov model to public services in general. This might involve the development of innovative schemes to give citizens a more active role in maintaining the quality of their neighborhoods, or it could involve bringing citizens together in virtual communities so that they can offer mutual help and support. In a connected world, the public is willing to contribute more—it is just a matter of finding the right means to tap their potential.

Similarly, the Obama administration is right to highlight the potential to transform collaboration within and among public sector organizations. One simple step is to offer public sector employees an electronic platform where they can contribute ideas on how their organization might improve operations. This should, however, be part of a more general shift toward a world where people are able to collaborate with those outside their teams and in different physical locations, and with their immediate colleagues.

The ultimate goal should be to create tools that enable public sector workers to collaborate across organizational boundaries. Imagine if all the people working to solve homelessness could easily discuss issues and jointly develop solutions, or if all the public sector workers seeking to encourage better fire prevention had a platform where they could share ideas and experiences. Such capabilities would transform internal collaboration and greatly increase the ability of the public sector to serve citizens.

## Conclusion

The Obama administration's open government agenda has aroused worldwide interest and, given the issue of transparency, much greater political prominence both in the United States and elsewhere. While initial efforts have demonstrated the potential of open government, they have also proven that more work is required to explore the agenda and find the right way of taking it forward.

In the meantime, some benefits are clear. One is increased public trust. In many countries, people are becoming less deferential. This shift has many positive aspects, but it can also mean that traditional respect for elected representatives and public institutions is replaced by suspicion, cynicism, or even hostility. Transparency can help rebuild trust. At the same time, it can also increase the effectiveness of public sector organizations.

In a world where public sector finances are under severe pressure, open government can maximize the public's ability to contribute to social goals. This is particularly important as societies respond to complex challenges such as climate change or increased life expectancy. Governments alone cannot solve these and other problems—they need to embrace open government, so that the whole of society can be mobilized and tackle issues together.



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**More Information**

The Cisco Internet Business Solutions Group (IBSG), the global strategic consulting arm of Cisco, helps CXOs and public sector leaders transform their organizations—first by designing innovative business processes, and then by integrating advanced technologies into visionary roadmaps that address key CXO concerns.

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