PARTICIPATORY POLITICS FOUNDATION

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OpenGovernment

Non-Profit Funding Prospectus - Full Version - Spring 2011

I. Summary

The Participatory Politics Foundation is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization with a mission to create free & open-source software for civic engagement. Our flagship project is OpenCongress.org, the most-visited not-for-profit website in the country for tracking the U.S. Congress, with over one million visits per month and 175,000 registered members.

Our next major project, OpenGovernment.org, brings the OpenCongress model of transparency to government at any level: state, city, international, and more. **Finally, a version of OpenCongress for state & local government.**

OpenGovernment.org launched as a beta version in January 2011 as a non-profit, non-partisan joint project with the Sunlight Foundation. Currently, the site displays official legislative information for five states: California, Louisiana, Maryland, Texas, and Wisconsin. Looking ahead, PPF seeks support to roll out OpenGovernment to the following:

- All 50 U.S. states - bringing our uniquely user-friendly transparency model to state houses across the country

- Dozens of major U.S. cities - some of which already offer open municipal data, others of which are just starting

- County & town government institutions, such as neighborhood block associations and other local communities

- Internationally -- OpenGovernment was designed to be remixable for other countries, global orgs., and beyond...

II. PPF's Mission & Organization

The Participatory Politics Foundation believes that the internet presents an unprecedented opportunity to inform and amplify individual political actions. We build free software and open-source web applications to increase public knowledge about politics, combat corruption, and create new opportunities for people to engage with government. OpenGovernment is our next major effort in free technology for the public good.

PPF's sibling organization is the Participatory Culture Foundation (PCF), which builds free tools for a more fair and democratic media landscape. PCF's flagship product, the Miro internet TV player, is used by at least 2 million people every month and stands as one of the largest open-source software projects in the world. We chose to incorporate PPF and PCF as 501(c)3 non-profit organizations because we believe that embedding a public-service mission directly into our organizational structure is the best way to serve these principles.

As a result of the closed-off legislative process, trust in government institutions like the U.S. Congress is trending ever-lower, and voting rates are unacceptably depressed. As public opinion agency Gallup put it in July 2010, the "Confidence in Institutions poll finds Congress ranking dead last out of the 16 institutions rated this year. Eleven percent of Americans say they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of confidence in Congress, down from 17% in 2009 and a percentage point lower than the previous low for Congress, recorded in 2008." Keeping in touch with your elected officials in government should be as easy as keeping in touch with friends on a social networking service such as, say, Facebook or Twitter. The public deserves a tool for government that is as robust and usable as other online services we use every day.

Going forward, free software and the open Web (plus libre data and flexible copyright licenses) give us all the tools we need to make public data available to the public, immediately and in full. From this foundation of open government data, an entire ecosystem of public-interest technology can evolve. We envision a future in which all three branches of government (executive, legislative, and judicial) at every level in our representative democracy (federal, state, city, local, and more) are featured on OpenGovernment for full public accountability.

III. OpenCongress - "Everyone Can Be An Insider"

The Participatory Politics Foundation conceived of OpenCongress.org in 2004. The major problem we sought to address was a lack of accessible information online about bills and votes in the U.S. Congress. Major bills received extensive coverage in the news, but even frequent consumers of political news lacked a go-to resource for understanding a bill's status and context in the arcane Congressional legislative process. The official website of Congress, THOMAS.loc.gov, published legislative info online, but suffered from major deficiencies in its technical standards, site features, and web design. (More than 15 years after its birth, despite areas of moderate improvement, THOMAS unfortunately still comes up short on all three of these counts and others.) Because THOMAS didn't offer a sufficiently user-friendly window on bills, its webpages were not cited in online news articles or linked-to on political blogs as often as they could have been. The public needed a free, non-partisan way to access official info about bills in Congress over the web.
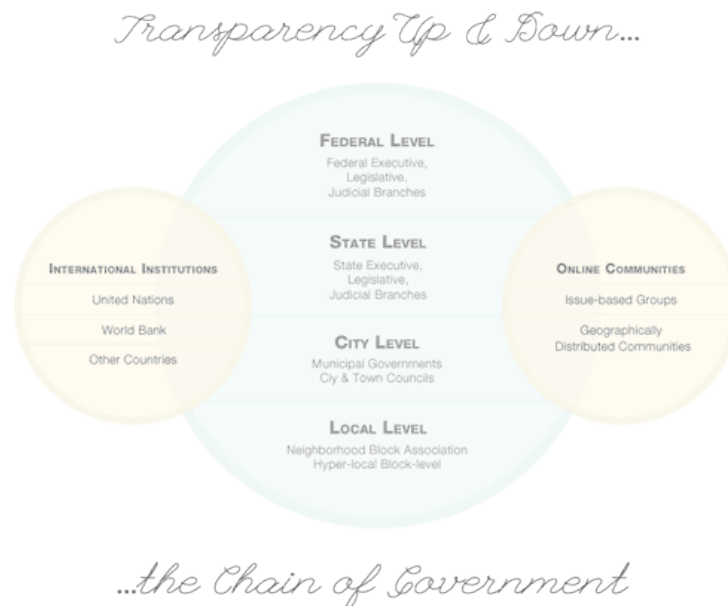
PPF addressed this problem by developing OpenCongress, which combines official government info with social wisdom from around the Web to give you the real story behind what's happening in Congress. OpenCongress uniquely aggregates legislative info from THOMAS with news & blog coverage, campaign contribution data, public

participation tools, and more, all in a user-focused web design. Since its launch in 2007, OpenCongress has grown to become the most-visited not-for-profit site for tracking the U.S. Congress and a leading advocate for the community-generated principles of Open Government Data. The Sunlight Foundation is the primary and founding supporter of OpenCongress, which is independent from any government entity, candidate for office, or political party.

(Homepage :: www.opencongress.org/)

Ever since PPF conceived of OpenCongress in 2004, we foresaw that this model of aggregating disparate data sources into a user-friendly web interface could be productively applied to other government entities in our representative democracy: state legislatures, city councils, neighborhood associations, governorships, public budgets, supreme courts, circuit judges, public-mission institutions such as schools & hospitals, foreign countries, international institutions, and more ::

Transparency Up & Down...

FEDERAL LEVEL
Federal Executive,
Legislative,
Judicial Branches

STATE LEVEL
State Executive,
Legislative,
Judicial Branches

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS
United Nations
World Bank
Other Countries

ONLINE COMMUNITIES
Issue-based Groups
Geographically
Distributed Communities

CITY LEVEL
Municipal Governments
City & Town Councils

LOCAL LEVEL
Neighborhood Block Association
Hyper-local Block-level

...the Chain of Government

In other words, we often received the quite-sensible question, "When will there be a version of OpenCongress for my state?" Or, "... for my city?" Or, "... for my neighborhood?" Or, ... "for my country?" **While our code has always been 100% open, we now have an even better answer to the question, "How do I make an OpenCongress for my local government?"**
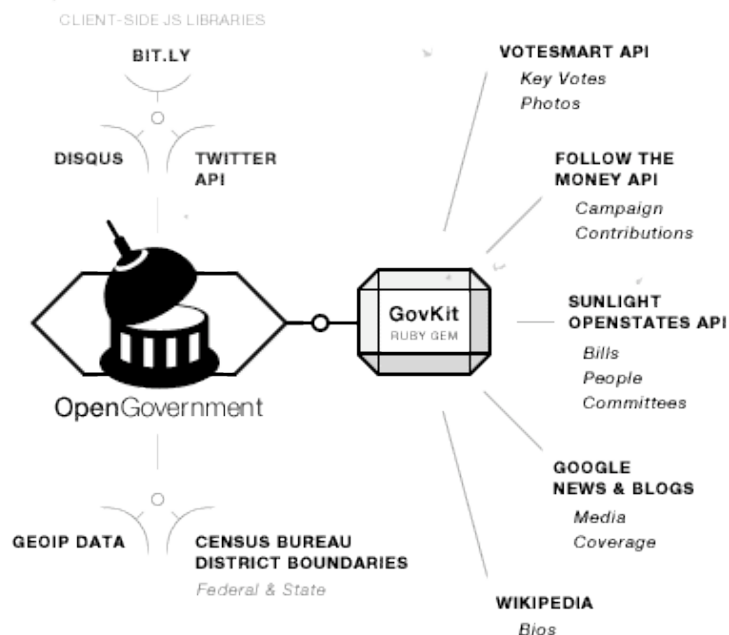
IV. OpenGovernment.org

Writing in early 2011, the lay of the land with official websites for U.S. state legislatures is nearly exactly as it was in 2004 at the federal level with THOMAS: a mishmash of non-standards-based, poorly-designed websites that don't do nearly enough to keep the public at large informed. Unfortunately, almost no U.S. state government makes its legislative data available in ways that are compliant with the Principles of Open Government Data. Out of the 49 bicameral state legislatures in the U.S. and one unicameral body (that of Nebraska), only one single chamber -- one body out of 99, namely the New York State Senate -- makes its legislative data available in ways that are fully open. Every other chamber of state government fails to serve its constituents by releasing valuable public data (legislative actions, votes, bill analysis -- not to mention campaign contributions) online in ways that are truly open, despite the readily available technical means to do so. The proof of this is how rarely they're used (linked-to and discussed), even on state-level political blogs, much less in casual political conversation among political activists.

OpenGovernment was designed to bring the OpenCongress model of transparency down to state and local governments. With OpenGovernment, we adapted and enhanced the OpenCongress code base, making it better-documented and more modular. We also simplified the web design and foregrounded more of our user-friendly participation tools alongside our unique data offerings. We present OpenGovernment to the public commons as a free, libre, and open-source model for open standards and future government transparency services -- contributions warmly welcomed and remixes encouraged. Together, we can inspire people to ask, "When is my state and city going to be on OpenGovernment.org?", and then collaboratively and continually roll out new local versions across the country, building momentum towards a new standard of openness in local government.

On the back-end, we're working with the team at Sunlight Labs and dozens of volunteers on the community-driven Open States Project, with the goal of publishing an open data standard and scraping machine-readable data for all 50 U.S. State Legislatures. These data streams provide government info to GovKit, the open-source API wrapper developed by PPF that combines official legislative data with campaign contributions and social wisdom from around the Web. GovKit, in turn, powers the OpenGovernment.org web application: public-facing & fully-featured versions of OpenCongress, with versions planned for all 50 U.S. state legislatures, dozens of major cities, and other locales.

All information contained on OpenGovernment.org, including official government information, is cited to its primary source. An overview of OpenGovernment's data sources is below, first visualized and then detailed:

BIT.LY

VOTESMART API
Key Votes
Photos

DISQUS   TWITTER API

FOLLOW THE MONEY API
Campaign Contributions

OpenGovernment

GovKit
RUBY GEM

SUNLIGHT OPENSTATES API
Bills
People
Committees

GOOGLE NEWS & BLOGS
Media Coverage

GEOIP DATA   CENSUS BUREAU DISTRICT BOUNDARIES
*Federal & State*

WIKIPEDIA
Bios

V. OpenGovernment - Our Data Sources:

1. **Official government information** from the community-driven Open States Project of Sunlight Labs. This project collects data about state legislative activities, including bill summaries, votes, sponsorships, legislators, and committees.
2. **News and blog citations** of bills & legislators from Google News & Blog Search
3. **Campaign contribution data** from the non-profit, non-partisan website of the National Institute on Money in State Politics (NIMSP), FollowTheMoney.org, via the TransparencyData API.
4. **Issue group ratings**, key vote analysis, and official member contact information (where available) from the non-partisan Project VoteSmart and their API.
5. **Social media mentions** from the Twitter API,
6. **Legislator biographies** from Wikipedia and "how state gov works" resources via the Ballotpedia wiki & others.
7. **Online Video** - made available to be crowdsourced for each state on the open-source Miro Community platform, a project of our sibling non-profit, the Participatory Culture Foundation (PCF), for curating streaming online video.
8. **U.S. Congressional data** from the OpenCongress API via our data partner GovTrack and the the OpenGovernment Community Project on the OpenCongress Wiki (built on open-source semantic MediaWiki).
9. **Geographic maps** of districts from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Forthcoming, we plan to integrate with the following as well:

- MAPLight.org state-level data on interest groups supporting & opposing major bills, as seen in their MAPLight.org/California state site, with more rolling out over the next year
- Dynamic district maps from the open-source GeoServer
- ThinkUpApp, an open-source software project that archives activity on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media
- Profiles of influential members of government and their financial & political backing from the open-source public accountability wiki project, LittleSis.org.

VI. More About PPF & OpenCongress Use Cases

1. The Participatory Politics Foundation operates primarily as a web-based organization, with three full-time and three part-time staffpeople all working remotely and collaborating over the Web. PPF's Executive Director, David Moore, serves as program manager on both sites and coordinates with the opengovernment community from a shared office space in New York, NY. PPF's Director of Technology, Carl Tashian, oversees PPF's technical processes and leads web development from his base in the San Francisco Bay Area. With the equivalent of only around four full-time staffpeople, then -- plus valued volunteers and allies in partner organizations -- PPF maintains and develops OpenCongress.org and OpenGovernment.org as leading open-source community projects for government transparency.

2. Summary of key metrics: OpenCongress recently surpassed 1 million visits per month, with an active community of more than 175,000 registered users, more than 300 volunteer programmers and evangelists on our development e-mail list-serv, and a sizable community on social media. The site's extensive RSS feeds, free widgets, and open API receive millions of requests for data every day.

3. Just as importantly, OpenCongress has emerged as the go-to, user-friendly resource for journalists, political bloggers, issue-based organizations, and casual web users to track and share the best information about their interests in Congress. In other words, OC doesn't only reach political wonks -- it reaches the long tail of web users with any political interests imaginable.

    i. OpenCongress is routinely linked from sites large & small (NYT, WaPo, Gannett News Sites, Washington Observer-Reporter, student newspapers such as Kansan.com), political blogs (TPM, Instapundit, DailyKos, HuffPo, RedState), social networking services (Twitter, Facebook, StumbleUpon), tech sites (BoingBoing, Slashdot, Digg), membership groups (EFF, MoveOn, SaveTheInternet), and local political blogs across the country (e.g. "Reporting Michigan", "Progress Illinois", and many thousands of others).

    ii. As an example of the type of engagement that OpenCongress makes possible, please consider H.R. 6867 in the previous 110th session of the U.S. Congress, a bill to extend unemployment benefits. Web users all over the country affected by the recession were seeking information about this kitchen-table topic, and what emerged was a great success: close to 60,000 comments were left in the comment forums for this one bill alone ::
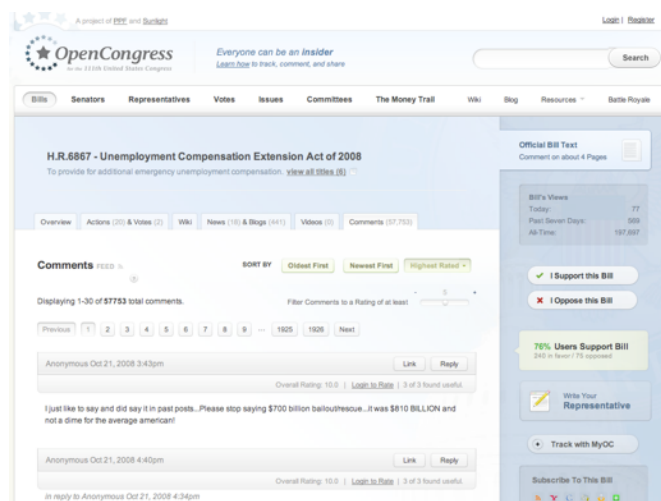
... organic user communities arose to trade updated information and analysis of the bill's key provisions and implications for all 50 states. Because OpenCongress is open-source and our data is portable, PPF was able to extricate the key insights from the comment forum and re-publish them in a publicly-editable wiki project, called Unemployment Wiki, that arose from user participation as a leading resource on these issues.

VII. OpenGovernment.org Development Roadmap

The OpenGovernment model scales in every direction: down, to state and local government; up, to international entities such as other countries' governments, the United Nations, or the World Bank; and horizontally, to non-profits organizations, academic institutions, businesses in seek of grassroots engagement, and any geographically-distributed online community. OpenGovernment.org is not simply a discrete website, but rather an open platform for contacting any set of elected officials, free and customizable for any imaginable community.

OpenCongress and OpenGovernment will syndicate each other's content and extensively link back and forth. User accounts on one will authenticate on the other, creating a seamless user experience between them. A user who creates a free account with either OC or OG will be able to see, on her profile, a comprehensive set of information about her U.S. Senators, her U.S. Representative, her elected officials in the State Legislature, and for many major cities, her elected officials in City Government (e.g., City Councilpeople, Ward Alderpeople, etc.)

For municipal-level data, PPF seeks funding support to write customized open-source code on OpenGovernment.org for local levels of government, starting with city councils. PPF programmers will work with existing communities of open-source developers in cities that are already doing work around #opengov. Many cities are close to or currently working on an open data standard for city-level legislation, and the open-source development community around OpenGovernment will provide incentives and technical support for these greater efforts. For example, see: CivicCommons; CodeCamp.org, with initiatives in Southern California, Southwest Florida, Philly, NoVa, Tampa, Iowa, Silicon Valley, and more. However, we won't restrict our partner cities to major population centers only -- dozens of smaller cities across the country will be worked on so as to bring existing data publishing up to the standard for inclusion on OpenGovernment.org, and further documentation of the OG code will continually make it easier for volunteer programmers to create their own versions in parallel with the community development process. For example, city-level government transparency has recently been considered by cities such as St. Petersburg, Boulder, Ann Arbor, Palo Alto, Santa Cruz, and Salt Lake City. All in all, any city or town, large or small, will have the opportunity and direction to create a valid data stream for further inclusion on the OpenGovernment.org hub. The potential target cities are legion, so we'll seek efficiencies by picking the low-hanging fruit -- and we have great flexibility in specific cities to target for the second and third wave of development and rollout (see below).

With additional resources and continued development, OpenGovernment.org will seek to offer the same core feature set as OpenCongress for state and local governments ::
      a) Read about bills, votes, Members, issues, and more in a user-friendly web design
      b) Usable searching of the site for bill numbers, colloquial terms for issues, and other interests

c) Read uniquely-aggregated news & blog coverage of every bill and Member, sorted by date and/or use-fulness as rated by the open user community

d) See visualizations of bill status and votes (roll call results) in clickable pie charts

e) Campaign contribution information for every Member of Congress (at the federal level, via OpenSecrets and MAPLight; at the state-level, via FollowTheMoney and Project VoteSmart).

f) Read full bill text, comment, link to individual sections, and compare revisions with our unique document viewer, built on the open=source DocumentCloud tool.

g) Track Congress via RSS feeds and personal "My OpenCongress" (MyOC) profiles of "tracked items"

h) Share pages & info via built-in social sharing tools, e.g. Digg, Facebook, StumbleUpon, Digg, etc.

i) Create widgets or Facebook apps of bills / Members / issues they're tracking, or support/oppose

j) Give a personal vote "aye or nay" on Bills via MyOC

k) Give personal approval ratings to Members via MyOC

l) Comment on Bills, Members, Committees., Issues etc. and see others' comments & votes in Recent Site Actions on your MyOC profile

m) Find and Make Friends on MyOC with users in their state, district, and nationwide...

n) Share personal affiliations, location, and preferred contact info on your MyOC profile page

o) Rate other users' comments & news articles & blog posts -- offering a unique venue for true peer-to-peer communication

p) Bookmark and share relevant content from OC or around the web using "My Political Notebook"

q) Easily contextualize what's hot in Congress on a number of fronts via Hot Bills pages, or Battle Royale sortable rankings

r) Compare any two members' votes head-to-head

s) Read, edit, contribute to, and query OpenCongress Wiki content for every member, hot bills, and more.

The goal behind each city page on OpenGovernment will be to both involve the local developer and advocacy community in being active on the site, and also to partner with allies for early beta-testing and outreach.

a. The model will be one where new states & cities are rolled-out continually as their data standards come on-line, providing an attractive public narrative and buildup to future releases.

b. This exciting narrative creates the possibility of pitting different states and cities against each other in friendly-yet-motivational competitions (or games) for meeting the open data standard. It provides citizens with a more-concrete use case of #opengovdata for their elected officials, and provides government employees with an achievable deliverable to showcase to their constituents as a symbol of their commitment to accountability. The question, "When is our city joining OpenGovernment.org?", or, "Why aren't we on OpenGovernment.org yet?" is a powerful motivation for all stakeholders to open up their city governments and get involved in politics.

c. As highlighted with OpenCongress, training for journalists and target publishers is a key component to facilitate adoption of these new web tools, so PPF will collaborate with our funders' communities in order to accompany launches with support -- both over the web (webinars), freely available case studies, volunteer evangelists, and in-person training where possible ::

(screenshot: bill text viewer of H.R. 3590, Senate's health care reform bill)

VIII. International Expansion of the OpenGovernment Platform

As OpenGovernment moves out of beta and rolls out to other locales, other countries around the world will have both a proven back-end data format and front-end user interface on which to base their efforts towards open government. Individuals from countries all over the world -- such as Brazil, Mexico, and Italy -- have written PPF to seek advice on developing versions of OpenCongress for the public benefit of their locales. One of the major stumbling blocks to date in their efforts has been the lack of publicly-available data, but OpenGovernment should prove a compelling example to other countries of the type of rewarding engagement that's possible with open web tools. What's more, public institutions such as hospital, school systems, and privately-held companies can remix the OpenGovernment code for non-commercial uses in order to filter up suggestions from their grassroots constituents.

Additional materials, such as sample info designs for city-level versions, open data specs, and draft development budgets are all available upon request -- email PPF Executive Director David Moore: david@ppolitics.org. Also, get in touch for previews of OpenGovernment web design and the "citizen dashboard" user experience, illustrating our vision of user-friendly online engagement.

IX. Summary of Outcomes ::

1. New websites based at OpenGovernment.org, along with the existing OpenCongress.org, for individuals and organizations to learn about, comment on, and share the best info about their entire chain of government.
2. A new base of open-source code OpenGovernment.org makes it easy and rewarding for web developers to adapt other data inputs into the OpenGovernment model of engagement (e.g. hyper-local communities, other countries, other government entities, etc.).
3. A popularized, peer-reviewed, and proven open data standard for governments at all levels to comply with in taking steps towards transparency and responsiveness.

4. A rich resource for journalists and bloggers to draw upon for research, tracking what's hot in their communities, combating systemic or personal corruption, linking for their web readership, and re-publishing for public knowledge about government.

I appreciate your consideration of this proposal and welcome your feedback and input. Please feel free to contact me any time to discuss these ideas in more detail, I'm available at your convenience and love trading ideas.

Sincerely,

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AIM / Jabber / Skype :: davidmooreppf

http://participatorypolitics.org/ || http://www.participatorypolitics.org/projects/ || @ppolitics

http://www.opencongress.org/ || https://github.com/opencongress || @opencongress

http://opengovernment.org || https://github.com/opengovernment || @open_gov

X. Appendix: Additional screenshots

1. Existing bill page on official .gov CA website, user-unfriendly:

I want to search again.

Documents associated with AB 1000 in the 2009-2010 Session

   Status - 02/03/2010 1247 bytes

   History - 02/02/2010 1608 bytes

Bill Text

In order to view the PDF version of the bill text documents, you may need a free viewer from Adobe.

   Introduced - 02/27/2009   HTML - 33752 bytes   PDF - 188734 bytes

Analyses

   Assembly Committee   - 05/12/2009 - 7521 bytes

   Assembly Committee   - 04/24/2009 - 32396 bytes

   Assembly Committee   - 04/21/2009 - 23758 bytes

Votes

   Assembly Committee   - 04/27/2009 - 927 bytes

2. Sample bill page on OpenGovernment-CA, with beta-version design styling:

More CA state-leg screenshots:

Committee page :

,

Vote page :

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          UNOFFICIAL BALLOT
MEASURE:         AB 1000
AUTHOR: Ma
TOPIC:  Employment: paid sick days.
DATE:   04/27/2009
LOCATION:        ASM. JUD.
MOTION: Do pass and be re-referred to the Committee on Appropriations.
        (AYES   7. NOES   3.)  (PASS)


        AYES
        ****

Feuer   Brownley      Evans   Jones
Krekorian        Lieu   Monning


        NOES
        ****

Tran    Knight  Nielsen


        ABSENT, ABSTAINING, OR NOT VOTING
        ********************************
```

... compare to OpenGovernment (beta) page of free public participation tools on bill pages ::

... and OG's more intelligible Issue index pages ::

California Issues

The California State Legislature officially assigns issue areas to legislation. Generally speaking, though, the bill-to-issue mapping used by the 50 U.S. state legislatures are unstandardized and byzantine. Below we're showing the issue areas used most frequently in this state, those assigned to bills four or more times. Click the link at the bottom of the page to view all of the many thousands of bill subjects -- some very specific, others very broad.

Our goal is to make arcane bills easier to find and follow through the issue areas that the public already knows. Towards this end, we seek non-profit funding support to manually assign the most-viewed bills in this state to one or more of the 46 legislative issue areas as determined by the non-partisan Project VoteSmart -- read how you can help.

Bill Subjects

Agriculture and Food

Animal Rights and Wildlife Issues

Budget, Spending, and Taxes

Business and Consumers

Campaign Finance and Election Issues

Civil Liberties and Civil Rights

Commerce

Crime

Education

Energy

Environmental

Family and Children Issues

Federal, State, and Local Relations

Gambling and Gaming

Government Reform

Guns

Health

Housing and Property

Immigration

Indigenous Peoples

Overview of bill page features brought together, for the first time all in one place, to build public knowledge on OpenGovernment:

What people are saying about OpenGovernment beta ...

- "I have been hankering for this resource for some time now! I received this e-mail from our executive director at Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children. I often used Open Congress working with organizations in DC and thought, how can we get local coverage & if it was even possible. This is truly great work and we will be excited to use it this session when we are hoping to see some reforms pass." -- Sarah Dunnagan, Communication & Development Coordinator of membership org., Friends & Family of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC)

- "Good news for state politics geeks. OpenGovernment.org yesterday launched in beta. It's a site that scrapes data from state legislatures — bills, campaign finance, people and issues — and puts it all in one accessible spot." -- Kate Golden, WisconsinWatch.org.

- "OpenGovernment.org and the Citizen Coder - Empower Individuals and Organizations to track government at every level" -- The Changelog Show on open-source software, podcast interview with Carl Tashian of PPF.

- "This site brings together bill information with blog posts, news stories, social media and public participation tools, and campaign contribution data." -- Pam Greenberg, The Thicket blog on the National Conference of State Legislatures