

The OpenGov eDemocracy Platform

The OpenGov platform for large scale online democratic decision making was pioneered at MIT's E-Commerce Architecture Program, honed through exploration in two semesters of graduate seminars, and tested in the MIT Media Lab. OpenGov uses community filtering, electronic agents and modular rules bases to create a self-governing, participatory and deliberative formal decision making environment. The platform responds to the research inquiry: how can hundreds of thousands or millions of people meaningfully participate in a timely, free and fair democratic process resulting in formal, binding decisions. The free and open source software aspect of this platform is foundational to the socio-political hypothesis: can people can take direct control and ownership of their aggregate affairs, including the processes and tools by which they govern themselves. As important aspect of the OpenGov platform is that there are no particular moderators, chairmen, facilitators or other individuals or groups empowered to frame, prioritize or even lead development of agenda items before the group. Rather, the premise explored here is that any individual or group is equally empowered to raise any potential topic for discussion and potential inclusion on a formal, binding set of final agenda or ballot items. Through a series of "ascendant democratic" thresholds, as more and more members of a given OpenGov Community "buy into" a proposal, each topic comes closer to inclusion on a list of item for final, official debate and vote. Through a series of community rules, easily configurable to fit each community, various content, interaction, deadline, debate, vote, parliamentary and other procedural thresholds and rules may be set. The result is a self-running, clean system leading inexorably from open dialog to agenda setting, to final debate and vote – up or down – on any issue any community may face into its future.

Again, the platform is tooled to address the customary ceiling of a few hundred participants in a direct democratic process resulting in formal, legal decision making processes. As such, the initiative examined various existing legal and business models whereby several hundreds, thousands or millions of participants have a formal right to participate in final deliberations or determination on an issue of concern to them. Through site visits, interviews with experts and ordinary participants and review of relevant literature and research in various fields, MIT has modeled the OpenGov system to support and reflect the core-needs of communities operating in the following environments: New England town meetings (e.g. toward creation and vote on warrant items), public consultations (e.g. toward a large scale urban development), union meetings (e.g. toward a labor contract), technical standard setting bodies, political parties (e.g. toward a platform). State and local referenda questions, share holder action, organized religion (e.g. toward global convocations or platforms) and global NGO and other non-profit membership meetings.

It is assumed that each community adopting the OpenGov solution will already have formal rules and processes governing its membership, participation and decision making procedures. The OpenGov platform can be configured to support and reflect those rules and processes and to enforce and innovate the identity and authorization management flows pertaining to individuals and groups operating within the community,

This prototype system was displayed, in demo form, at the 2003 National Conference on Digital Government Research. This prototype was also evaluated positively in the Harvard Law Review. A link to one of the graduate seminars exploring the themes that matured into this platform can be found on the MIT OpenCourseWare site, at:

<http://ocw.mit.edu/OcwWeb/Architecture/4-285Research-Topics-in-Architecture--Citizen-Centered-Design-of-Open-Governance-SystemsFall2002/CourseHome/index.htm>

Further information can be found at <http://ecitizen.mit.edu/openg>

The OpenGov platform is a project of the [MIT E-Commerce Architecture Program](#), under the direction of [Daniel J. Greenwood](#).

(Note: The Government Information Awareness project, aka opengov, can be found at: <http://opengov1.media.mit.edu/> and is not affiliated with this initiative).