

Welcome, watchdog.net

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As you've probably noticed, it's political insanity season in the US. I can hardly go outside these days without running into someone complaining about the latest piece of campaign gossip. I've mostly tried to keep it off this blog, but it's hard to not get swept up in the fever. As someone who wants to make a difference in the world, I've long wondered whether there was an effective way for a programmer to get involved in politics, but I've never been able to quite figure it out.

Well, recent events and Larry Lessig got me thinking about it again and I've spent the past few months working with and talking to some amazing people about the problem. I've learned a lot and must have gone through a dozen different project ideas, but I finally think I've found something. It's not so much a finished solution as a direction, where I hope to figure more of it along the way.

So the site is called watchdog.net and the plan has three parts. First, pull in data sources from all over — district demographics, votes, lobbying records, campaign finance reports, etc. — and let people explore them in one elegant, unified interface. I want this to be one of the most powerful, compelling interfaces for exploring a large data set out there.

But just giving people information isn't enough; unless you give them an opportunity to do something about it, it will just make them more apathetic. So the second part of the site is building tools to let people take action: write or call your representative, send a note to local papers, post a story about something interesting you've found, generate a scorecard for the next election.

And tying these two pieces together will be a collaborative database of political causes. So on the page about global warming, you'll be able to learn more about the problem and proposed solutions, research the donors and votes on the issue, and see or start a letter-writing campaign.

All of it, of course, is free software and free data. And it's all got a dozen different APIs to make it easy for others to build on what we've done in their own work. The goal is to be a hub, connecting citizens, activists, organizations, politicians, programmers, and everybody else who's interested in politics.

The hope is to make it as interesting and easy as possible to pull people into politics. It's an ambitious goal with many pieces and possibilities, but with all the excitement right now we want to get something up as fast as possible. So we'll be developing live on watchdog.net, releasing pieces as soon as we finish

them. Our first goal is to put up data about every representative and a way to write them.

I've managed to find an amazing group of people willing to help out with building it so far. And the [Sunlight Network](#) has encouraged me and graciously agreed to fund it. But we still need many more hands, especially programmers. If you're interested in working on it, whether as a volunteer or for pay, please send me an email — me@aaronsw.com — telling me what you'd like to help with.

We only officially started work yesterday, so there's not much up yet, but hopefully it'll give you a sense of where we're going:

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