**The Information Republic: Legislating in the Internet Age**

A White Paper

Jeffrey Gene Johnson

American Political Reform Network (www.americanpoliticalreform.net)

**Abstract**

In a time of great dissatisfaction with government and politics in general, there is a great need to find ways to improve our political processes. Money and partisan struggle dominate our politics, and large segments of the public feel voiceless and powerless. This document describes a proposal to use information technology to empower public participation in legislative democracy. By examining how we gather, disseminate, and manage the information that forms the core of our political system, two key opportunities are identified to improve political participation using on-line technology. First, by leveraging the power of information technology and distributed networks, Americans can be encouraged to pool their skills to engage directly in the creation of legislation. Second, by making the business of legislatures interactive and visible to the public, representatives will become more accountable and thus more responsive to the public. If properly executed and embraced by the public, these improvements have the potential to dilute the influence of special interest money on lawmaking, and to encourage the proliferation of new political coalitions beyond the limits of the two-party system.

The Information Republic: Legislating in the Internet Age

# Introduction

The goal of this proposal is to make our political system more efficient and just. By intelligent use of information technology we can enable new modes of public participation. The specific aim is to improve and refine the legislative process at the state and federal levels.

To understand how information technology can aid our political process, we need to first develop a picture of how information is created, transmitted, and used in our politics. In this document no attempt is made to do a rigorous analysis of information flow in the American political system. Instead a high level overview is outlined, at which point I merely asserted that this viewpoint highlights two areas in which obvious opportunities exist to increase public participation in politics. I also argue that exploiting these opportunities, by providing the needed information technology, provides enormous potential to refocus the role of legislators upon their original task, which is to serve the constituents they represent. Additionally the potential exists to substantially reform the process of lawmaking to better serve the public interest, and diminish the extent to which the interests of the major parties and special interest groups are inequitably served. That is to say, the process of lawmaking can become more open and transparent, and can be made into something that can better be described as intelligently forming effective policy and bears less resemblance to the old adage about dividing pork and making sausage behind closed doors.

Individuals and organizations, whose experience comprises the vast wealth of professional and academic knowledge employed in all areas of commerce, research, reporting, and policy debate, are invited to step forward and collaborate in a public movement to propose, author, and champion new legislation. This move toward citizen driven legislation will use innovative software to foster imaginative and cooperative problem solving.

In addition, elected representatives can interact with their constituents by using on-line technology to gather democratic consensus on questions, issues, and legislative proposals. legislators may introduce and pass laws based on direct citizen participation, a move which expands public involvement beyond the limitations of periodic elections. Such change requires no alteration of our existing election procedures.

There are three types of natural concern about such an approach that arise immediately. Firstly there are doubts and worries about the technology: is it secure, reliable, scalable and accountable; will it provide the power and flexibility required to accomplish this task; and will it be politically neutral? Second are concerns about such an approach placing too great a burden upon the majority of voters, who can’t possibly have the time, energy, or knowledge to fully participate in such a system. Lastly there is the traditional worry over the danger of passionate populist enthusiasms leading to measures that are extreme, economically unsound, or for some other reason impractical.

Each of these objections has validity, yet none of them is insurmountable. We live in an age where new technology and new information management capabilities place such an innovative democratic political system within our grasp. The solutions proposed herein aim to show how these anticipated problems can be eliminated or managed by judicious design and intelligent use of resources that are available today. The result can be a transformation of our political system that will be welcomed by Americans of any political stripe.

## The Problems We Face

We face many political problems today. Dissatisfaction with our politicians and political parties is widespread. The Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street movements are evidence of this frustration. Congressional approval ratings have sunk to single digits. Our election contests are divisive and corrosive battles that are consuming more money and more effort each year.

It is difficult to tell when our representatives are governing and when they are campaigning. Public statements from our leaders are so often calculated to stir up anger and resentment among supporters that the public can no longer trust leaders to make honest and factual remarks. The spin is so cleverly crafted and laced with deceptive half-truths that it takes political experts to decipher the true meaning and intent.

Elected officials are locked into a struggle where party strategy and the struggle for power have eclipsed the process of cooperative and imaginative problem solving. Political survival depends on legislators being able to appeal to powerful lobbying interests who make generous campaign contributions in exchange for preferential legislative treatment of narrow economic interests.

Our present system has subverted the fairness and justice that democracy is designed to deliver. Congressmen exist in a closed world whose price of admission is either power or large bundles of cash. They focus inward on the self-perpetuating logic of power and money at the heart of our capitols, meanwhile exerting the minimum effort required to establish political cover by distracting voters with partisan rancor and placating them with empty promises.

Our political system is stretched to its limits, and some would say it is already broken. Our first-past-the-post winner-take-all form of voting has made the two major parties virtually unassailable by third party challengers. Any third party challenger introduces what is known as the "spoiler effect". By drawing votes away from one of the major parties, voting for any third party has the undesirable effect of helping to elect the party least in accord with one’s political views. This provides a barrier to third party success that is quite difficult to overcome.

This two-party duopoly has backed voters into a corner where they must choose between one of two platforms intended to embody for each voter all of the democratic yearnings and longings, all of the choices and preferences, and all of the hopes and dreams for a better society.

In 1800 each congressional district had about 50,000 inhabitants. Today this number is around 650,000 per district. During this time slavery was ended, women won the right to vote, we have developed high speed transportation and aviation, powerful computing and global communications, and an information-rich energy based technological society that participates in a global economic system. With this increased social, technological, and economic complexity has come a commensurate political complexity.

Yet our basic method of political representation has not changed accordingly. Every two years, two major parties choose a candidate and a platform. In practice this means that the party platforms must encompass a continually increasing range of issues and policies. This has the dual effect of making it more unlikely that voters can agree with everything in a platform, and it means that more is at stake each election period. Our elections have become contested more bitterly and more expensively with decreasing likelihood that outcomes will be satisfactory to voters, even when the party of their choice wins the election. By narrowly channeling our expression of democratic will into bi-annual contests, with the expectation that this will guide ever more complex decision making responsibilities, our political system leaves the public feeling frustrated, powerless, and voiceless.

Our representatives are no longer philosopher statesmen who debate and deliberate together. They no longer work together to resolve conflicts and arrive at workable solutions that take into account a diverse set of viewpoints. They are successful lawyers and wealthy businessmen who caucus with political leaders to seek ways to outmaneuver their opposition on the other side of the aisle. They don't interact intimately with their constituents in an effort to more effectively represent the voters they were elected to serve. Instead they send messages through the media to manage public perception. They are heavily influenced by wealthy and powerful interests, and they are constantly seeking to pad their campaign war chest, which has come to outweigh actual job performance as the key to winning re-election.

Our legislators don't even write or read the bills being considered. They employ large staffs to handle the bulk of their responsibilities, and bills or amendments are often written by lobbyists whose interests the measures serve. Much happens out of the public view, and although a public record exists after the fact, there is often little public review or input prior to passage of a new law.

How can we break out of this impasse, where two parties at war control every activity of our legislatures, and access and influence can only be had for the price of hefty campaign contributions?

## Moving Toward a Solution

To make progress in healing the ills of our democracy, we need to focus a clear eyed politically neutral view on the form rather than the content of our political process. We need to back away from the arguments over policy and direction, and carefully consider the mechanisms, the means, and the structure of our politics as an information system. We can develop a more constructive approach to good governance by re-thinking how we gather and organize information relevant to decision making. By inviting all citizens with good ideas and professional skills to participate and contribute to lawmaking, by intelligently structuring and managing political information to maximize participation and transparency at every step of the legislative process, and by leveraging the on-line information processing capabilities available to us today, we can fully exercise the political freedom provided by our Constitutional framework.

The following aims to expand on these goals and to diagnose the information bottlenecks that weaken our present approach. This will serve to establish a context that provides a means of creating a less hostile and more solution oriented political environment.

We can identify from the foregoing litany of political woe two key problem areas that are desperately in need of a solution. The first can be expressed by asking: How effectively can we represent the will of the American public by limiting voter input to an election contest between only two parties held every two years? The answer seems more and more obvious: not very effectively. The second problem area is the effect of money in politics, and how thoroughly the influence of money and moneyed interests dominate the work of lawmaking that occurs between elections.

Every two years we make an electoral choice based on a platform or party philosophy. This party platform is supposed to serve as a kind of predictive tool for voters to determine what effect their vote will have. Due to the increasing complexity of our society, a partisan platform and philosophy must take into account an ever broadening range of complex issues. Because this vote must serve to express voters' interests and hopes for the next two years, the stakes of the contest are very high, and these campaigns have become increasingly divisive and expensive as a result. In spite of the higher perceived value of winning elections, the increasing complexity of our politics have exhausted the capacity of party platform and party philosophy to serve the intended purpose, and over time they have become instruments far too blunt to fairly express the nuanced and diverse political will of the public.

These considerations suggest that limiting public participation to periodic elections has become an information bottleneck that hinders the full expression of political choice that is the right of our citizens. By compressing the entire sum of political action and political longing into the abbreviated context of an election contest, we are not directly applying the knowledge and information reflecting the aggregate intelligence of the public to the specific issues of good governance. We are rather deciding whether party A or party B will hold the reins of power without supervision for the next 2 to 6 years, which means the political will of the public only indirectly contacts the details of legislative decision making. This is a recipe for political frustration, and also brings to the fore the next major weakness in our political information model.

The chosen representative, having navigated the cataracts of the political information bottleneck we call an election, is now free to govern at will in an environment where there is a paucity of information related to the collective political preferences of the constituents. The group concerns of the party take primary control, with only an occasional outburst of sentiment from the public giving the representative cause to consider a position on an issue that diverges from party orthodoxy. The party represents only a portion of the electorate back home, a portion which may even be a minority given the mathematics of our first-past-the-post method of casting and counting votes.

The representative operates in a centralized location that is not only poor in information representing the constituency; it is an environment rich in information representing the interests of a relatively small but financially powerful subset of the American public. This concentration of wealth is able to exert profound leverage on the legislative process because control over the mechanics of lawmaking is confined to a compact geographical center and a small group of lawmakers. What sustains this system of unjust and imbalanced access by a minority of political interests is their campaign contributions, which enable the representative to triumph in a contest where the hurdle to be cleared is the low bar of convincing the electorate they are not as bad as the other guy.

These two factors, the inequitable influence of narrow political interests that occurs between elections and the political information bottleneck that occurs at election time, are the core insights at the heart of this redesign of our politics as an information system. The first essential step is to remove the highly valuable lawmaking function of authoring legislation from the imbalanced and information poor environment of our legislative halls and bring it out into the information rich and transparently open domain of the public sphere. The second critical step is to relieve the election bottleneck by providing the public at large a practical way to accurately express their votes on a per-issue basis rather than being limited to elections. Our elected officials would retain the crucial and statutory responsibility of deciding which laws to enact, but their decision making process will become more motivated by the need to serve the public, and less by the convenience of following party lines and responding to well financed special interests.

If we can refocus the energy and creativity of public political engagement directly onto the process of creating and approving legislation, we can accomplish three dramatic improvements. First, if people sense that they will hold more control between elections, we can defuse the tension in the election process and dramatically reduce the divisiveness, and even the costs of elections. Secondly, the resultant dividend of political effort and funding not squandered on elections could be rechanneled directly toward our true goals of finding solutions to individual political problems. Finally, if the will of the public is expressed clearly and unambiguously in publicly transparent quantitative measurements, great pressure will be exerted on our legislators to turn away from business as usual, which includes partisan maneuvering and catering to special interests, and to rededicate themselves to truly serving the electorate.

A system which is restructured in this way should force the moneyed interests to conclude that they will need to engage the public and gain their support openly in order to effect changes to the law. By encouraging legislators to be more responsive to the public, the convenient avenue of purchasing favors inside of legislative halls and outside of the public view will be substantially narrowed, if not shut down completely in the long run. The public can stand firmly between the influence of money and the votes of their representatives.

We can begin to envision a new approach toward election contests. Candidates could become less focused on partisan promises and heaping blame on opponents, but rather could run independent of parties and focus on how effectively they use innovative technologies to place control in the hands of the public. They can focus on how responsive their political decision making can be to the will of their constituents, with an emphasis on making this a full time year-around job, rather than an election-time show.

By laying the ground work to set these trends into motion, we could be well on our way to solving these major conundrums of American politics. By presenting information to the public that shows the correlation between public input and candidate performance, the voters can adapt their election participation to be more data driven. This will provide an enhanced sense of control in the political process. Such elections will be less expensive and less subject to demagoguery and massively bank-rolled deceptive advertising campaigns.

Constituents will have less need to navigate the subjective minefield of political rhetoric to decide how well their representative is doing his or her job. The pressure to raise funds would give way to the pressure to be more focused on their home constituency, which is how our politicians ought to behave. As independents, they will not be influenced by party strategy, which increasingly seems to be more about angling for power than it is about serving the public interest.

## The New Lawmakers: The American People

If we step back and think about our political system as a whole, we see that the vast majority of the population is shut out of the process of proposing specific solutions, debating the merits of various proposals, and actually crafting the content of legislation. The elected representatives are not only decision makers, but they are gatekeepers controlling who may and may not participate. So not only do we allow undue influence to moneyed interests, whose influx of dollars helps sustain this unjust and ineffective system, but we also shut out a vast pool of professional, educated, experienced members of the population who have the capability to make valuable contributions, but do not have the connections or public performing skills required to be elected to office.

Article I of the United States Constitution establishes the rules for representation in proportion to the population, and enumerates the powers of Congress. It vests in our legislature the authority to enact laws, and the authority to determine the rules of legislative proceedings. It does not, however, grant exclusive rights to author legislation, or the power to monopolize the debate and deliberative proceedings regarding the content of new legislation.

The power to determine the content of legislation, the power to control what legislation shall or shall not be put to a vote, and the power to confine debate and deliberation to the few and the privileged are powers that Congress and legislatures in general have reserved for themselves for historic reasons. We have come to accept these facts as natural and practical because of geographical and numeric constraints on discussion and decision making. These constraints arise from limitations in transportation, communication, and information technology. These limitations no longer need apply to the way we organize our democratic processes.

Given the technological advances of the day, it has become evident that practical and logistical limitations no longer require us to delegate the important process of authoring, debating the content, and deliberating on the merits of new legislation to an exclusive group of elected officials. These functions are not granted exclusively to legislatures under law.

The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) has already pioneered a model for drafting and promoting legislation from outside the halls of any elected legislative body. Their focus is placed on a set of conservative, business oriented policies, but there is no reason their model can not be replicated and extended to a more transparent and open process for a variety of policy areas.

The time is ripe that we redirect a substantial portion of the time, energy, and money we spend on partisan election contests to a more fruitful purpose. Our advanced information processing systems and high speed distributed networks are capable of providing an ideal platform for a free market of ideas to thrive and become a rich source of policy detail and consensus.

By constructing the appropriate on-line collaborative tools, which enable experts to cooperatively author legislation in a manner continually subjected to public review, comment, and criticism, it is within our reach to develop lawmaking processes that combine unprecedented openness and transparency with the highly effective utilization of the collective wisdom and untapped expertise of the American public. As these competencies are developed, the public will begin to demand that all legislation is authored in this fashion, and will express great distrust of laws that are crafted at the last minute in backrooms using a process that is not thoroughly vetted in the open air of public review.

We already possesses a wealth of think tanks, advocacy groups, public interest groups, and professional and industrial organizations that engage in detailed research and produce reports and policy recommendations. Our population is full of doctors, lawyers, engineers, political scientists, economists, public policy experts, teachers, scientists, and a variety of other professionally skilled and knowledgeable people who have something to contribute. There is a growing body of academics and researchers who perform a valuable journalistic function by informally sharing their expertise and policy analysis with the public in the form of blogs.

Presently the public political participation on the Internet is undisciplined and unstructured. There has been a spontaneous explosion of ways for people to share their ideas, but this source of ideas remains disorganized. Finding focus and consensus remains an elusive element. We possess as a people a powerful engine of creativity and intelligence that is only tenuously connected to the gears that turn the wheels of power in Washington, D. C. and in the capitols of the 50 states.

This can be corrected by creating the right information management framework and tools, and an organizational structure that enables and unleashes the creative potential of the public at large. Here are some quick suggestions: we need tools that can enable the public to find sites of political resources and consensus building in the policy areas that interest them. We need tools that will help organizations possessing concentrations of expertise to propose legislation for public review, to solicit collaborative revisions from knowledgeable members of the public, and to gather broad public input via ratings and comments that help rank the approval of ideas and locate weaknesses in proposals. We need tools to help gather public consensus about the quality, veracity, and reliability of various sources of on-line news and commentary.

For example a web directory with links to all web sites participating in the political process would be easy to create and very useful. Such a directory would be non-partisan and provide alphabetic listing as well as a category based hierarchical listing of sites specializing in specific policy areas. It would include a searchable index based on topic and content of the sites. The types of participants listed can include news and political commentary, sources of research and data, political fact checking, forums for discussion and debate, and sites that sponsor and manage the drafting of legislation. Sites can be rated by users and ranked based on perceived value.

Sponsors of policy recommendations and legislative proposals can use a variety of collaborative models tailored to the needs of lawmaking. Wikipedia is an example of a simple collaborative authoring model. The experience gained from the creation and management of this on-line resource can be a valuable starting place for the development of new politically oriented collaborative authoring models. Closer moderation and limiting of authoring capability to well vetted experts would be important aspects of a model for drafting legislation on-line. But also powerful facilities can be provided to allow the general public to browse as reviewers, to comment and criticize, and to give approval ratings for laws or sections of laws. The rating process will be useful to moderators and authors, enabling them to find recommendations or critiques that have the highest level of support among reviewers.

Considering this situation, a new model for the role of our elected representatives seems possible. The job of lawmaking can gradually migrate to the public sphere and the free market of ideas. Representatives can be freed to focus their energies on their relationship to their constituents. Going further in our use of information processing systems to address the election bottleneck, a representative could use an on-line interactive voting system to determine the will of the voters on each issue. Such a system could present to constituents each new bill with full text, politically neutral pro/con summaries, an analysis of the constitutionality of the bill, and a summary of the fiscal impact.

## Tracking and Voting on Legislation

In addition to opening opportunities for private, public, and non-governmental organizations to draft legislation based on extensive public review, we can also create software to enable citizen authored and approved legislation to be submitted to our legislative bodies. Elected legislators can use such software to gauge the reaction of the public to all bills proposed for submission. A workflow model will track the status over the life-cycle of each piece of legislation before a legislative body. During the lifetime of each bill, the public can use on-line voting software to register their level of demand for the measures in the bill.

A syndicating server can be established and maintained for each federal and state level legislative body. These servers will provide a standardized feed containing information about all bills proposed and entered into the legislative process. This feed will be available publicly for any software application to utilize.

On-line voting software can consume the raw data from legislative syndicating servers and present a graphical model for each bill showing its location in the legislative process. Other information associated with each bill will be the results of public voting, the legislative roll call for bills that have been put to a legislative vote, reasons explaining why bills are not brought to a vote but rather languish in committees, brief pro-con summaries, analysis of constitutionality, a fiscal impact summary, and links to the sponsoring organization that drafted the bill, and all other relevant background and history of the legislation.

## Addressing Three Natural Concerns

As mentioned at the outset, there are three natural concerns that arise when contemplating such an approach to legislating. There is the concern about the security, reliability, and political neutrality of the software. An important concern is that the average citizen does not have the time, energy, or knowledge to provide input on every piece of legislation under consideration. And finally, there is the worry that populist sentiment could lead to mass support of policies that are risky or impractical for reasons that are well established but for some reason overlooked by a majority of the public.

To start with the concerns about the technology, in the interest of openness and transparency, the software envisioned to enable this political model will be developed under an open source licensing model. As such it will be in the public domain, it will be open to inspection by anyone, and usable with no licensing fee. This will ensure that no financially interested entity can purchase or control the source code, and it will enable security experts to exhaustively scrutinize and correct vulnerabilities in the design. The widespread visibility of the design should serve to prevent any deviation from political neutrality.

A great deal of careful design will be required to established registration procedures that ensure identity, residential address, and eligibility based on citizenship or residency. Since the software will not involve actual voting in elections, some legislators may wish to extend participation to legal residents in their districts, since government policy affects them as well. The point is that actually being registered to vote in elections is not necessarily a pre-requisite to participate in on-line democracy, since the results will serve legislators in an advisory capacity. Well organized and successful efforts to register large numbers of constituents with the on-line voting system will be part of the campaign process, and one of the factors the public can use to judge the job performance of a representative.

We perform a great deal of banking and commerce on-line, and adequate encryption technologies are well established. The system should not ever allow anyone but the voter themselves to view their democratic choices in connection with plain-text identity or address information. The voting mechanism will enable independent auditing software to tally votes, and use a secure mechanism based on encrypted tokens to trigger email verification of the votes. This will constitute a rapid electronic recount facility. Voters will receive electronically encrypted receipts that can be used to verify how their vote was counted.

Moving on to the issue of voter participation, the key concept to aid voters who are overwhelmed by detail or suffering from exhaustion or apathy will be the ability to delegate. On-line voting software will present a roster of organizations in each district that are willing and able to take on the responsibility of being a target for on-line voter delegation. Such organizations would in all likelihood include the Democratic Party and Republican Party, but any party or organization possessing the wherewithal to register their voting recommendations on-line for each bill under consideration could compete to attract on-line voters.

The voting public, via the on-line voting technology, will have the ability to electronically delegate their vote to the registered delegation target of their choice. This will allow their vote to automatically track a party-line recommendation on each issue with no further effort required by the voter. The voter may reassign the delegation at any time. But voters will also retain the ability to override the delegation and defect from party orthodoxy on any particular issue that has special interest to them. Other voters with the time and knowledge to do so will have the ability to defect more often, or even to engage fully in citizen legislating by making independent decisions on each issue that is put to a vote in the legislative body.

A major benefit of this model is that it will create a virtual proportional representation system. For example, libertarians may form coalitions with liberals on particular social issues, such as the legalization of marijuana or protecting reproductive choice, while sticking with small government conservatives on matters of taxation and the regulation of industry.

Centrist Democrats and Republicans may find it possible to cooperate and compromise in a pragmatic problem solving mode on economic and budgetary matters, such as tax reform, that their respective left or right wings might not support.

Some religious voters may align with conservatives on social issues such as abortion or same-sex marriage, but still find common cause with liberals on some programs designed to compassionately alleviate poverty, such as health care and education reforms.

Environmental activists can work with pro-business voters that are willing to recognize the job-creation potential and economic justice of covering external costs and developing far-sighted sustainable business practices.

A vast potential for new found political alliances on particular issues will be unleashed, and new vocabularies and new forms of political thought will be enabled.

The public can come together to demand important electoral reforms that serve no partisan interest, but might meet resistance from the major parties if it challenges their dominance by encouraging third parties to run for office, by enhancing ballot access, or by establishing measures to eliminate the practice of gerrymandering.

More importantly, every minor party or political organization with the competency and reputation to attract voter delegation will be able to participate in a meaningful way. This provides a pathway for the public, should it wish to, to gradually lessen the monopolization of political power by the two party duopoly.

Finally we must address the concern that populist waves of voter sentiment could lead to approval of legislation that suffers from obvious deficiencies or risks. It is important to understand that the on-line voting software will function in an advisory capacity only to elected legislators. It is not legally binding in any way, and they will retain the right to override or veto the public voice by voting differently. It is expected that legislators may choose to do so when a vote is very close and lacks clear majority support, or when levels of participation are too low to draw meaningful conclusions. This will be the judgment call of the legislator alone, who will feel obligated to work hard to explain such a decision to the constituency, and it is expected that this type of veto will be undertaken rarely and at the peril of losing office in the next election season.

# How to Accomplish These Goals: The Null Party

In order to create the architecture, design, and external interface specifications of the software outlined in this document, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization is being formed. This organization shall use the title of "The Null Party". This name is chosen to reflect the idea that the organization is devoid of partisan content or purpose, and seeks to improve only the forms of American democracy, without any reference to political or partisan content.

The Null Party will be dedicated to openness and transparency. It shall be funded by voluntary contributions and philanthropic donations. It will accept no private investment capital. It is essential that the organization maintain complete political neutrality. It is designed to favor no party or interest, but only to serve the public by reforming our political process.

The Null Party seeks no political power, and its sole purpose is to improve the quality of democracy and governance for all Americans, regardless of political orientation. Its methods and philosophy can be freely emulated by other political organizations who share the same goals. The software developed by The Null Party will be open source and in the public domain, available free for use and inspection by all.

The Null Party will primarily engage in four types of activities, as outlined below.

## On-line Voting Technology Development

The Null Party will maintain a staff of software developers to design and implement the core architecture of a secure, transparent, on-line software platform for legislative voting. This will include a reference implementation of a web user interface, a secure and encrypted voter database, authentication and registration procedures for enlisting voter accounts, a secure auditable vote counting module, and the syndicating servers to be associated with each legislative body to provide up-to-date data, status, and a workflow model to manage each bill. The user interface reference implementation will be easily adaptable and customizable for use by legislators serving particular voting districts.

The Null Party will maintain an open source repository, and will moderate public submissions for consideration. The development team will seek to leverage existing ideas and implementations to the greatest degree possible, and will gladly participate in joint development projects with existing software consortia or software companies that understand the tremendous public value of this approach.

## Public Relations to Spread Null Party Ideas

The Null Party will work aggressively to educate and inform the public about its non-partisan model for legislation, and how it can transform the American political environment. Through on-line dissemination of information, through the media, advertising, and public presentations, the Null Party will seek to spread public awareness and overcome obstacles to acceptance.

## Encourage and Assist the Development of Strong Civil Sector Institutions

Professional organizations, business and industry groups, public interest groups can learn to pool resources and develop the expertise needed to draft legislation using on-line collaborative technologies to build consensus, solicit input and criticism, resulting in an unprecedented environment of openness and public review.

The Null Party will create software, and share ideas with others creating software designed to facilitate open and transparent on-line collaboration to propose legislative solutions, mediate debate, and build consensus among large on-line communities and organizations. Design, recommendations, and reference implementation will be provided for open source development.

It is anticipated that the on-line community and other software development organizations will produce competing versions of such collaborative tools. Over time, preferred models and standard interfaces with superior attributes will rise to the top.

## Training and Support of Independent Candidates

The Null Party will not function as a political party, in that it will not register voters and it will not participate in elections.

It will train and provide software support to candidates who are willing to adopt this on-line innovation as part of their outreach to constituents. The Null Party prefers candidates who will pledge fidelity to the on-line voting results, who will not be influenced by parties or lobbyists, and who will enter election campaigns as non-partisan independent candidates.

The Null Party can gain acceptance incrementally. There is no need for sweeping change or modifications to existing law. A few successful Null Party candidacies can serve as a confidence building step that will encourage more and more legislative districts at state and federal levels to embrace this innovation in democratic participation.

While the Null Party will not advocate for any partisan positions on policy, it will work in support of electoral reforms that independent of partisan concerns can improve the effectiveness of elections for all Americans. Some examples are discussed in detail below.

## Important Reforms

The Null Party is an explicitly non-partisan organization. There are certain reforms that require legislative action and enhance the form of our politics without providing support or advantage to any partisan position or political content.

Being able to put a candidate or party on the ballot is a fundamental pre-requisite of democratic participation. Our country has a complicated patchwork of antiquated ballot access requirements that vary from state to state and from county to county. These often present hurdles that are easily cleared by older established parties, but which can prove daunting to newcomers. The Null Party favors national guidelines to reform these laws and create a level playing field by making ballot access requirements simpler, more consistent, and more welcoming to political newcomers.

Gerrymandering is a well known political evil. When a party has the upper hand in a state legislature, it is able to redraw political districts in such a way to make it easier for its candidates to win electoral majorities and retain them. This is done by creating monstrously shaped districts that pick and choose among voter demographics with political goals in mind. An algorithmic approach, such as shortest-split line districting, can eliminate the political games involved in drawing district boundaries. Such a model will create the shortest and simplest boundaries based only on geography and population distributions. Districts will be formed by a reasonable and simple non-partisan approach.

Range-voting, Single Transferable Vote (STV), and Instant Runoff are systems that enable voters to rank multiple candidates. These vote counting methods produce more just outcomes based on voter preference than our present first-past-the-post voting method does. Converting all electoral contests to use such systems will encourage voters to support third parties, and help to break the two-party duopoly that weakens our political system.

In keeping with the goal of moving the lawmaking process into the public sphere, the Null Party would like to see legislative bodies end the practice of tacking unrelated amendments onto bills in order to weaken support for a bill or to sneak a pet project through on the coattails of a popular measure. If citizens draft, approve, and submit legislation to an elected body for ratification, it should be given a simple up or down vote without modification by elected officials.

To enhance the effectiveness of political information management methods discussed in this paper, we support changes in legislative rules that require a bill to be available for public review on-line for a reasonable minimum time period before a legislative vote can be taken.

Recent revelations have alerted the public to the fact that legislators are able to legally engage in insider trading practices that are forbidden to corporate directors. Such practices create a conflict of interest and should not be tolerated by the public, regardless of political affiliation. The Null Party supports laws to require legislators to keep investments in a blind trust while serving in office. We may find that other similar financial restrictions on elected officials may be desirable in order to eliminate such corrupting incentives.