First End-of-Month Report on the NewGov IP Portfolio

Britt Blaser hired me to assess and organize a portfolio of intellectual property owned by the NewGov Foundation.

NewGov has spent 12 years developing tools and datasets that enable regular people to influence legislation. The goal is to fix American politics by crowdsourcing policy, based on the principles described in NYU Professor Clay Shirky's 2012 TED Talk: How the Internet will (one day) transform Government. Shirky described how open source programmers have developed data management systems called "repositories" they use to collaboratively manage millions of very large text files in ways that could never be done on paper. Specifically, he compares the large Linux code base to the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

Britt says that's important because "*Legislators and programmers do precisely the same thing: Draft, Edit, and Rearrange Blocks of arcane text which, when incorporated into an existing code base, have real effects in the real world, many of which are unexpected and unpleasant.*" He says that's why most people don't like laws and software.

According to Seth Godin, politics and democracy are very different things, "*The last day of a political campaign is the Going Out of Business Sale, because if you lose, it doesn't matter and if you win it doesn't matter.*" He says that creates an obligation for us to focus on fixing democracy and not politics because, "*Once you see things differently, you're inspired or almost required to act differently.*"

Britt believes most people in the US want to make a difference, but get lost in politics instead of democracy. This idea is a fundamental principle to NewGov. While I take it as true, I need to explore it further to know what getting lost in politics really means and where do people go wrong.

NewGov tools:

1. Use big data to demystify how constituencies, which are sets of voters in the same political jurisdiction, have actionable influence over specific issues and committees.

2. Allow those constituents to make their voices heard to create a tangible impact over policy at the level of legislative committees.

Britt believes the tools can work because, contrary to popular belief, politicians do care about their constituents' concerns, according to the Congressional Management Foundation.

However, for politicians to pay attention to them, constituents need to be verified by a trusted third party using a trusted verification process. This, of course, is a service that NewGov provides. Only when verified does the voter's voice become trusted enough that politicians can't afford to ignore them.

Prestige as a Service

But how do you get people to tell their congressman to support a specific bill? The answer is, only with a strong incentive, an instant payoff on social media which NewGov calls Prestige-as-a-Service, (**PaaS**).

Because people don't want to be involved in policy details, the best you can do is offer the voter a simple gesture to give her instant social media prestige based on her influence on one of her representative's Committee memberships. Because of the way Committee memberships are assigned, every American is part of a small fraction of people who have constituency influence on a Committee.

The GEOvoter API namespace Variables Dataset shows that, for the 23 top-level committees in the U.S. House of Representatives, the percentage of Americans with meaningful constituency influence averages just 5.8%, and the highest is 7.8%. That makes any of those constituents "kind of a big deal", a prestigious and precious resource to be celebrated and highly regarded by social media celebrities.

That's far too much to explain to influential constituents when they are discovered.

Rollo May once wrote: "*Joy is the affect which comes when we use our powers*". So, to get somebody to take an action, the system must offer immediate click-to-tweet gratification. That is the joy that will motivate most people to click a button:
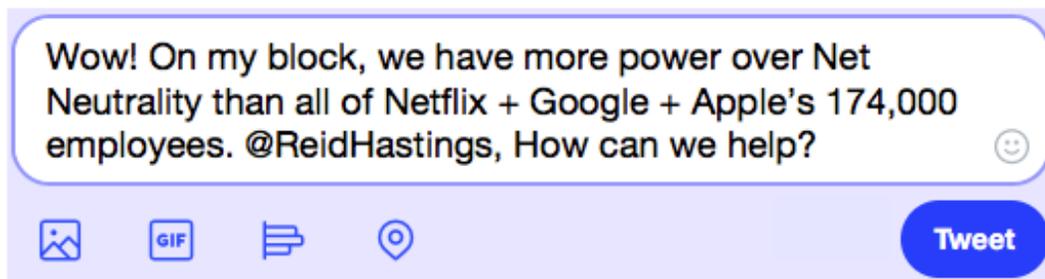
When a well-known issue champion like Netflix CEO Reid Hastings, a Twitter-designated "verified account", becomes aware that a constituent in Somerville, NJ has a high level of influence over their trademark issue, he will want to share that through a re-tweet. In practice, that means sharing the discovery with Netflix' Regulatory Counsel's Office, using the same Twitter API.

Later workflows are also based on Prestige as the core benefit to the constituent who may perceive political influence as an incidental feature. I believe this to be a great strength of the project.

Seth Godin said, "*MLK didn't tell people in the civil rights movement what to do, but he did open the door for many of those people to do things in parallel.*"

Clay Shirky added, "*This is cooperation without coordination. This is the big change.*"

Specific politicians on specific committees initiate specific legislation. Therefore only the constituents of those few politicians have influence over committee actions. I believe this to be a flawed representation system, but that is how the Constitution is written. This goes hand-in-hand with Britt's doctrine that,

Better politics ≠ Better policies

This is my current understanding of NewGov's mission. Their methodology is thorough and deep and based on the importance of a neutral approach, and of looking for the gaps. For these reasons, I am confident and optimistic about the project. I believe it can make the difference it aims to do.