

Is This the Tipping Point for Democracy 2.0?

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Is President Obama's vision of promoting transparency in government the tipping point for a new era of democracy? Set upon the stage of the fusion of technology and globalization ... citizen engagement in democratic governance is being positioned to have a starring role in democracy 2.0. Fueled by the potent combination of connectivity, collaboration, access and transparency – or openness – the shift towards open, collaborative governance is underway. But while our information highways may be wired for openness and collaboration all roads leading to Capital Hill in Washington have most resoundingly in the past been hardwired for opacity and secrecy.

On his very first day in office, President Obama signed a memorandum to all federal agencies directing them to break down barriers to transparency, participation, and collaboration between the federal government and the people it is to serve.

A clear signal was sent that it was not to be business as usual but rather the beginning of a new era of open and accountable government meant to bridge the gap between the American people and their government. No one really knows even now what impact this is going to have on the machine of government or the lives of Americans.

"My Administration is committed to creating an unprecedented level of openness in government. We will work together to ensure the public trust and establish a system of transparency, public participation, and collaboration. Openness will strengthen our democracy and promote efficiency and effectiveness in government," said President Barack Obama.

The open government initiative has set its sights high. Recent steps taken such as the transparency in federal spending, research and data sharing just recently made available at the new open federal government platforms Data.gov and apps.gov are important steps in improving practice. But at the heart of Obama's open government is the transformation in the philosophy of governing.

At the end of May, the Administration launched the [Open Government Initiative](#) (OGI). This unique outreach effort, led by the Office of Science and Technology Policy, sparked a collaboration between the public and the government. What resulted was the long awaited and highly anticipated Open Government Directive (download as [pdf](#), [txt](#), [doc](#) or view on [Slideshare](#)).

"We just can't afford to have a federal government solution for every issue. By relying on the ingenuity of the American people we can advance these policy issues in new and more creative ways," said Chief Technology Officer Aneesh Chopra during the online public announcement of the Open Government Directive.

The directive, sent to the head of every federal department and agency Dec. 8th instructs the agencies to take specific actions to open their operations to the public.

"The three principles of transparency, participation, and collaboration are at the heart of this directive. Transparency promotes accountability. Participation allows members of the public to contribute ideas and expertise to government initiatives. Collaboration improves the effectiveness of government by encouraging partnerships and cooperation within the federal government, across levels of government, and between the government and private institutions," stated the White House website.

The movement towards open government while currently spearheaded by the American experience will continue to be a work in progress for civil society around the world. For some time now democracy has often pitted the citizen 'David' against the all powerful, all-knowing federal government 'Goliath'. Well we all know how that tale ends with David destroying Goliath. Democracy 2.0 is emerging with the distinct possibility of recasting this tale.

As Malcolm Gladwell noted in his popular book *The Tipping Point*, "In the end tipping points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and for the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped."

Because the open government movement rests on the notion of collaboration it is more than just a sum of its parts – the Internet – the Obama Administration. Open government is a diverse, distributed movement fueled by open technologies resulting in the pushing of the democracy reset button. It is about the ongoing engagement of citizens in their governing processes, policy, programs and institutions.

At the tipping point is the movement away from the old archetype of citizens as David and government as Goliath. Open government aims to move the primary demonstration of civic engagement away from the ballot box exclusively and decisively in the direction of informing policy and spearheading innovation. Instead of governance dividing the democracy's inherent potential... democracy is tipping towards a David and David mode of collaboration where both dissent and collaboration fuels democracy, strengthens governance and applies collective innovation.