



## How Web 2.0 is Changing Politics

**Just voting is no longer enough. Technology is empowering a new civil society.**

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**The political decision-making process, and thus our very democracy, will change rapidly in the next few years. New technologies will make participation among citizens and other actors much more common and important. Policy-makers must take these developments into account and do a significantly better job of explaining and legitimizing their foreign policy choices.**

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For the first time in the history of modern democracy, new communication technologies are on the brink of emancipating citizens from powerful paternalistic states and established party organizations. In the future people will not see their influence limited to elections every four to five years; rather, citizens will exercise permanent influence through constant suggestions, ideas, and contributions, all organized over the internet. There may still be physical demonstrations, but the real catalysts of political change will be politically ambitious and well-organized networks armed with professionally managed databases. Governments and politicians will have to take these developments into account in order to retain their capacity to act. The main challenge for civil society and non-governmental organizations lies in organizing and using these unique opportunities to transform the old political system. After all, organized pressure is one of the few ways to force political change.

These changes do not signal a weakening of representative democracy; on the contrary, the institution is moving forward and becoming even stronger. Just as nation-states yielded power to supranational institutions such as the EU in order to stay relevant and legitimate in the face of increasing globalization,<sup>1</sup> leaders and policy makers must now do something to combat rising political dissatisfaction. Web 2.0 offers a solution in novel forms of citizen involvement. In a certain sense this signals a return to the basics of the democratic polity, as citizens demand, and receive, more direct participation. Political actors will feel more and more pressure to address the concerns of their constituents. But at the same time, the movement presents a constructive solution. Once the people have this creative power at their disposal, it will be hard to make them give it up, and along with their increased role, citizens will also have more responsibility. Politics will move further away from the prior conception of the nation-state, which draws too much of its legitimacy from the capacity to care for its citizens and on a poorly understood definition of social justice. Conversely, this outdated concept of governance delivers too little of the promises of freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> See Alan Milward, [The European Rescue of the Nation State](#), University of California Press, Berkeley 1993.

## **Politics Under Pressure**

But what will the new Web 2.0 world look like? Do developments and concrete examples already exist? The basic premise is that Web 2.0 technology will not only change interpersonal interactions but also has the potential to revolutionize political participation. Social communities such as Facebook and MySpace, video portals like YouTube, and platforms for direct communication such as Twitter are still shrugged off as children's playthings. But counting millions of users and still growing, these websites are in fact the first harbingers of a new era, one that will significantly change political communication. Web 2.0 turns trusted tenants of campaigning upside down: many instead of few, decentralized organization at the individual level, and a transfer of control. It depends on exchanges among a large number of users who work together to find new ideas and new solutions. In the future, more and more movements of well-connected activists with their own agendas will grow around issues that are important to them. This is how targeted agenda-setting will work in the future, and savvy professional political campaigns will use extensive distribution lists to harness the power of this phenomenon.

Through new technologies, these politicized networks now have powerful leverage to force the policy process to do things their own way. New actors will break into the system that has always been reserved for insiders, with their own language and rituals. Transparency and innovation will spread. Politicians will have to be directly engaged in addressing the concerns of their constituents. Those who do not will lose support, not only among voters but also among established media outlets. Indirect rankings of politicians have already appeared, and those who reliably deliver solutions to their constituents' problems have come out on top. In Germany, the websites [politikerwatch.de](http://politikerwatch.de) and [abgeordnetenwatch.de](http://abgeordnetenwatch.de) have already started this trend towards holding politicians to the standards of service providers.

The most interesting question for our democracy and for the future of our political communication is who will use these developments to their advantage, and who will merely be run over. Politics in Europe are still mostly conducted behind closed doors. Politicians are generally reluctant to engage clumsy party mechanisms. But if established politics cannot provide an answer to the coming changes described above, then new, more responsive parties will arise out of the internet networks. The first glimmer of this phenomenon came with the surprising success of the internet-friendly "Pirate Party" in the 2009 European elections. Even in Germany, such increasingly organized communities of voters could significantly change the national party landscape. "Peoples parties" will soon no longer be able to use this moniker if they do not proactively adapt to these developments. Even governments may feel pressure to change when faced with increasingly innovative NGOs.

A good example of this trend is the [WhiteHouse2.org](http://WhiteHouse2.org) network established by Obama supporter Jim Gilliam. As of June 2009, the network boasted 8600 registered users. The website functions as a forum for people to voice political concerns and demands on topics from taxes to health care reform to investment in renewable energy. But its real strength is in the opportunity for other users to comment on, evaluate, support, and spread these ideas. The more electronic signatures a policy suggestion collects, the more prominent its position on the organization's homepage.

Topic-specific platforms such as Al Gore's [WeCanSolveIt.org](http://WeCanSolveIt.org) and [Politics-360.org](http://Politics-360.org) can also apply direct pressure on policies in these areas. In Germany, digital society is slowly becoming an important factor in public opinion. One example is the e-petition against a government plan to allow authorities to block access to specific internet sites, which gathered well over 100,000 signatures and was extensively covered in the established media.

This model of an independently organized civil society has had a particularly impressive effect in rising and developing countries where freedom of speech and of the press is weak or repressed. Here, large numbers of citizens, activists, non-profits, and aid organizations use Web 2.0 technologies to exchange ideas, organize campaigns, and mobilize people. A fascinating example of this grassroots democracy was the February 2008 protests against the Marxist rebel group FARC. Simultaneous protests were organized in 160 cities around the world by the Facebook group “One million voices against the FARC.” In 2006, the dialog and discussion platform founded by Esra’a Al Shafei, Mideastyouth.com, organized a successful campaign in support of Egyptian blogger Kareem Amer, who had been sentenced to four years in prison for his critical posts.

Furthermore, the current example of Iran shows that the needs and wants of young people are becoming more and more relevant politically. An estimated 70,000 to 200,000 blogs make up a channel of communication that the Iranian government cannot hope to control completely. During the campaign, Hossein Mussavi – the main challenger against President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad – mobilized voters through his 40,000 member Facebook group, as well as Twitter and text messaging. After the first calls of election fraud, security forces reacted by immediately blocking text message traffic and various internet portals. But communication could not be completely stopped. The resulting demonstrations were mostly organized electronically.

Even one of the most powerful despots of our time, Robert Mugabe, has experienced resistance through the internet. Since 2001, the Kubatana Trust of Zimbabwe and the Network Alliance Project have run kubatana.net, an electronic network of over 250 NGOs. The goal is to spread information among and strengthen the connections between democratic forces in Zimbabwe. In a country where the government completely controls the traditional media, Kubatana uses email and cellular technology to distribute newsletters. Activists also use cell phones, landlines, and VoIP technology to access Kubatana’s audio files. The portal Sokwanele.com stands at the center of the Zimbabwean democratic movement. By documenting and publicizing the highly professional and effective monitoring of the 2005 and 2008 elections, Sokwanele aroused public outcry over the violations and fraud carried out by Mugabe’s ZANU-PF. The website includes a navigable “map of political violence,” based on Google Maps and electronic reports from users. Reported episodes are documented in extensive detail, for example with Flickr slideshows and direct links to articles and blog posts.

### **New Ideas and Solutions for Politics**

Web 2.0 is not only suited for political demands or protests; people – constituents – may also use it to approach politicians directly with their good ideas. Previously deterred by the classical political party structure, educated, politically concerned citizens will now have much better access to and a stronger involvement in the political process. Instead of the classic letter to the editor or the distant representative model, future citizens will enjoy the opportunity to contribute directly, often focusing on themes of importance to them and organized ad hoc as situations develop. The objective: to generate policy recommendations from the collective intelligence of informed citizens.

Companies such as Dell, IBM, and Starbucks have long recognized the creative potential of the “wisdom of the masses.” Their goals in including various community features on their websites extend beyond advertisement and customer retention to actually improving their own products and services. Customers and staff were invited to offer constructive criticism and suggestions for improvement. The success

was striking: the website received more than ten thousand responses, which included elaborate suggestions for technical innovation. The gains for the companies were enormous, as they received valuable input that helped them strengthen their brand and stay competitive, for free. The customers functioned like a large group of external creative consultants who donated their labor-intensive recommendations.<sup>2</sup>

Apparently, many people share a strong willingness to get more involved. If a coffee chain succeeded in harnessing the creative potential of their customers, then the policy world, which touches the lives of individuals much more profoundly, should benefit even more from the “wisdom of the masses.” However, the successful implementation of such a bottom-up initiative requires more than a webmaster and a pretty homepage. It requires a talent for political communication and agenda setting, a professionally organized network and database, first-class marketing, an intuitive sense of the target group, and last but not least a solid financial backing.

When these preconditions are filled, technologies such as theme-specific web communities, Wikis, and videoconferencing can be used to collect the ideas and arguments of an intelligent and well-informed citizenry. To turn these into policy recommendations, the information must be evaluated and summarized. This process requires intensive supervision. After all, bureaucrats—especially the high level decision makers—do not need numerous online fora where anyone can post any unstructured comment. Only precise, readable policy recommendations, ideally enriched with some expert knowledge, are highly useful. The transparent and systematic presentation of citizens’ input is decisive in ensuring its influence on the political process.

However, if politicians hope to benefit from the knowledge of their constituents, they must be willing to take the suggestions and ideas seriously. Ideally, they would pledge to survey the suggestions regularly and eventually implement them. Only then will this external input have a chance to become an influential factor on the political structure. Which opportunities would this open up for the political complex, or for example the Chancellor? She could supplement her weekly speech with a website, on which she could invite citizens’ structured input on her policies. The comments would have to be processed by her staff or by the Press and Information Office of the Federal Government. The Chancellor could then respond with monthly discussions or a town hall meeting, in which citizens would ask the chancellor and other top-ranking officials live questions via Twitter. Videos of the meetings could be broadcast on Facebook or YouTube.

It is increasingly evident that governments, parties, ministers, and other politicians who do not take the communication revolution seriously will encounter future difficulties gaining access to the wider public. If politicians recognize the power of new media, they can use the new technologies as a superb seismograph to gauge what concerns are important to their constituency and how well-received their previous policies have been.

We are just at the beginning of this development. Web 2.0 will enable actors in all stages of the political process to access reciprocal feedback. Eventually, politics will become more intelligent and more effective.

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<sup>2</sup> For a thorough discussion of the Web 2.0 strategies used by corporations, see Jeff Jarvis, [What Would Google Do](#), New York, 2009.

## **Creating Networks, Explaining Foreign Policy**

International politics will also be significantly changed once populations can be systematically informed and mobilized through new technologies. In the international arena, it is important to distinguish between two distinct dimensions: the domestic legitimacy that defines a government's capability to act in the context of foreign policy, and the public diplomacy directed at foreign audiences, such as those living in areas of crisis. For the latter, it is important to involve and mobilize the relevant local forces. Thus, the foreign ministries should use Web 2.0 as a tool for dialog and process design to build upon the constructive potential of the local civil society.

US President Barack Obama reaches out to foreign people directly, rather than concentrating solely on national governments. How can this proven combination of technology, interconnectedness, and communication channels fail to get constructively interested citizens involved? Today, most people around the world have access to the relevant information. During his election campaign, Obama succeeded in using the internet to mobilize people, even those who previously considered themselves merely passive objects of politics, and engaging them as proactive actors. Why should we doubt the adaptability of this approach to people living in conflict areas? Surely they are able to give relevant policy advice. With the help of communications tools and concrete propositions, policy makers can solicit and integrate valuable contributions from these previously untapped resources. Again, the success will depend on the right interconnectivity of online and offline activities.

Even established democracies could capitalize on the expertise of their peoples. Innovative approaches on how to benefit from Web 2.0 potential can be found on the website of the US State Department. After Hillary Clinton assumed office, the State Department introduced the strategy of e-diplomacy in order to expand the reach of their website and to sharpen the focus on political questions. Thanks to the "dip-note" blog featuring articles of high ranking diplomats, interactive cards, and an open invitation to dialogue in various Q&A sections, the State Department succeeded in doubling the number of daily visitors and RSS-subscribers. One webcast relating to climate change was viewed more than 10 million times for example, with more than 50,000 comments and 7,000 questions. Furthermore, the State Department— just like the White House— also communicates with American voters and users the world over through Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Twitter and other Web 2.0 platforms.

NATO also uses an open communication strategy on the internet. Stefanie Babst, the Deputy Assistant Secretary General for Public Diplomacy Strategy, explained NATO's vision for a successful "new" public diplomacy strategy at the Partnership for Peace Symposium at the end of January 2009.<sup>3</sup> She specified that in order to maintain their influence and their persuasiveness, politicians must identify the motivations and shared interests of their constituents and integrate the new political networks into their own planning. Public diplomacy, according to Babst, must be attentive, credible, and willing to face the challenges of Web 2.0.

In German domestic politics, international relations remains the realm of the elites, removed from the concerns of the wider public. However, this state of affairs cannot endure in the age of global distribution of information. The discussion surrounding the foreign deployment of the Germany military is a good example. The German

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<sup>3</sup> See Stefanie Babst, "NATO's New Public Diplomacy: The Art of Engaging and Influencing," available at [http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/articles/view/NATO%27s\\_New\\_Public\\_Diplomacy:\\_The\\_Art\\_of\\_Engaging\\_and\\_Influencing](http://www.atlantic-community.org/index/articles/view/NATO%27s_New_Public_Diplomacy:_The_Art_of_Engaging_and_Influencing).

government to this day continues to treat the subject with shame, avoiding the mention of combat operations or fallen soldiers. They shy away from proactive advocacy campaigns in support of their policies, fearing that the public, still very pacifistic at heart, might react negatively and punish them in the next elections. Yet such an evasive attitude is not sustainable in the long term for such a big country, situated in the middle of Europe and with a special historical responsibility. After all, German national security, its ability to form alliances, its credibility, and thus its influence in the international arena are at stake.

Thus, it is imperative for the federal government to identify supporters in the organized civil society and to encourage these supporters to voice their constructive backing in the public sphere. To this end, the numerous initiatives and organizations addressing foreign policy and its relevance to the lives of every citizen should be strongly encouraged. Large parts of society are open to the idea that foreign policy is also domestic policy. But rarely do politicians communicate this truth as succinctly as the former German Minister of Defense Peter Struck in his now-famous sentence about how German security must also be protected in the Hindu Kush. Then why is there no professional publicity campaign that explains the activities and achievements of the German military in Afghanistan? Every initiative for energy-efficient lamps is widely publicized by the German government. The government should promote our foreign policy just as actively. Otherwise, as the public coffers continue to dwindle, people will soon ask why we are building schools in Afghanistan but do not have the money to pay for more teachers in our own schools.

Web 2.0 communities are highly suited for the analysis and communication of increasingly complex questions concerning international relations. In these settings, experts from think tanks, politicians, and citizens can engage in comprehensive discussions and propose new ideas. Further integration of students and eventually of every informed newspaper-reader moves us towards the goal of “foreign policy for everyone.” Furthermore, these networks encourage interdisciplinary communication as politicians, economists, scientists, social scientists, and media representatives join the debate. In Germany, a professionally managed Web 2.0 platform can act as the central meeting point the strategic community has been seeking. A civil society engaged in domestic affairs and a successful platform for the strategic community—the future is bright.



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