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Lt. Gov. Newsom and Former State Sen. Blakeslee Trail-blaze Digital Platform to Transform Government Transparency

Developed with Cal Poly students, the hi-tech online platform Digital Democracy opens Capitol insider knowledge to citizens, reporters, and small advocacy groups statewide

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Today, Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom and former state Sen. Sam Blakeslee launched Digital Democracy, a pioneering online and interactive platform that merges cutting-edge technologies to help close the knowledge gap between well-financed groups and small advocacy organizations, giving individuals the tools to transform the relationship between citizens and their government

Developed by students at the Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy (IATPP) at California Polytechnic State University (Cal Poly) — and dubbed “CalChannel meets CalAccess on Facebook” — Digital Democracy uses voice and facial recognition, data mining and natural language processing to offer Californians access to state legislative hearings with a Google-like search, and allows users to identify key Capitol players and their connections to campaigns, interest groups and other legislative actions.

“Technology has radically changed the way society interacts, but government is on the cutting edge of 1973. All of this only increases the gap between people and government,” said Newsom, an IATPP advisory board member and author of the book “Citizenville,” which explores civic participation in the digital age. “Digital Democracy gives citizens the keys to unlock Capitol corridors and assess facts in a way that they can be part of the process of governing again.”

“We developed Digital Democracy to open up government,” said Blakeslee, IATPP’s founding director and a former state senator from San Luis Obispo County. “Right now it is a very closed place, and the public is largely not able to see what happens, unless they are attending legislative committee hearings in person. The California Legislature does not produce transcripts or minutes from these hearings. There is no list of who was in the room, influencing decisions that were made.

“With this powerful new platform, Californians will be able to see exactly what people are saying as state laws are being written.”

A bipartisan poll released last week from IATPP shows overwhelming support for requiring all state documents, including the budget, to be available online with a search engine similar to Google.

The survey also found that nearly all Californians want public hearings in the Legislature to be captured by video and made available to the public on the Internet within 24 hours after the hearing. California’s Legislature currently does not produce minutes or transcripts of legislative committee hearings. A recent report from the consumer advocacy group U.S. PIRG graded every state on government-spending

transparency, and California received an "F," coming in dead last.

Digital Democracy gives advocacy groups fighting for veterans, the homeless, foster children and others the ability to easily keep tabs on where lawmakers stand on the issues that matter to the public. The idea for the platform came from advocates who worked with Cal Poly students and faculty members to create a tool that would give a voice to those in California who, until now, did not have one.

"Unfortunately, the children and families that we serve don't have lobbyists, and organizations like ours can't afford one," said Jim Roberts, CEO and founder of the Family Care Network, a San Luis Obispo-based nonprofit that helps foster children along California's Central Coast. "But we want to be able to make an effective impact in Sacramento that will ensure our families and children's health and well-being.

"Until now, I would drive five hours from San Luis Obispo to Sacramento just to sit in on committee hearings. With Digital Democracy, I can be part of that legislative process without having to leave my office. This will make me both a more effective advocate and give me more time to focus on delivering the services essential to the success of our state's foster children."

Engineering and political science students at Cal Poly built the online platform by combining their respective expertise in technology and government.

"No system like this was available before we built it here at Cal Poly," said Foad Khosmood, a computer science professor and IATPP senior research fellow for Digital Democracy. "These students truly exemplify Cal Poly's Learn by Doing philosophy. They are working on cutting-edge technical solutions with a tangible social impact, helping ordinary citizens interact with their own government."

Funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation and the Rita Allen Foundation, Digital Democracy allows anyone to track and share video clips of the arguments being put forward as new laws are being crafted, who is in the room influencing major decisions at the state level, how their elected officials are voting, and what patterns can be observed in their words and actions. This first-of-its-kind online tool uses 21st-century technology to open California's government and empower all citizens with a voice in Sacramento.

More Online

To learn more about Digital Democracy visit: www.digitaldemocracy.org

To watch a video of how it works visit: <http://bit.ly/1KKhMCl>

Watch videos of advocates sharing their stories: <http://bit.ly/1OVVAGf>

Broadcast TV/Radio: Download videos of advocates from Google Drive:
<http://bit.ly/1DSbUxi>

Background

SF Chronicle: New Technology Makes Sacramento Politics More Transparent
<http://www.sfchronicle.com/business/article/New-technology-makes-Sacramento-politics-more-6222916.php>

KQED: Big Support In Bipartisan Poll For a More Transparent California Legislature
<http://www2.kqed.org/news/2015/04/29/big-support-in-bipartisan-poll-for-more-transparent-california-legislature/>

California Receives 'F' in Annual Report on Transparency of Government Spending:
http://calpirgedfund.org/news/caf/new-report-california-receives-f-annual-report-transparency-government-spending?__utma=1.851829209

About the Institute for Advanced Technology and Public Policy

Under the guidance of founding director and former state Sen. Sam Blakeslee, Ph.D., the nonpartisan, interdisciplinary organization's mission is to develop practical solutions to societal issues by informing and driving public policy through advanced

technology. Teams of Cal Poly faculty and students, together with public policy leaders and industry experts build technology solutions to pressing real world problems. <http://www.iatpp.calpoly.edu/>

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