

WINNING THE FUTURE IN THE PERSONAL DEMOCRACY AGE

Newt Gingrich

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The challenge posed by the editors of this anthology relates directly to the focus of much of my efforts over the past several years: How to migrate government from what I call “the world that fails” (one of paper-based bureaucracies of process, checklists, regulations, self-preservation and punishment) to “the world that works” (where entrepreneurs rapidly create adaptable new technologies, incentivize productivity and innovation with rewards and encourages risk-taking).

The challenge is to replace the Founder’s “quill pen with a mouse” and to imagine a government for the Information Age. It’s a useful exercise because, in fact, governments today still metaphorically operate with the quill pen, and in some instances, do so almost literally. Take for instance the recent admission by the Department of Commerce that after spending \$1.3 billion they are going to drop the effort

to develop hand-held computers for canvassers in the 2010 census. Instead, they plan to revert to paper-and-pencil and hire over 600,000 temporary workers at a cost of approximately \$13-15 billion (\$37 per person counted). This means that by 2010 the cost of the census will have almost doubled since 2000, having already doubled since 1990.

This sort of cost explosion without any improvement in capacity and capability (the antithesis of Moore's Law) is a systemic challenge that permeates all of our government bureaucracies. In nearly every economic sector, we see products and services with increasing quality, more choices, greater convenience, and decreased cost. Yet, in nearly every part of government, at all levels, we see precisely the opposite: lower quality, fewer choices, greater inconvenience and spiraling costs. Clearly, this pattern is unsustainable if America is to continue to be the leading power on the planet in the 21st century. So, indeed, imagining how we would "reboot government" for the Information Age is not just an exercise in speculative fiction, it is the beginning of a plan of action.

I want to suggest three principles that should guide us in using the innovations of the Internet Age to migrate government from the world that fails to the world that works.

First, our system has to harness the power of collective intelligence, best described in James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of the Crowds*. At American Solutions we have developed a "Solutions Lab"—an Internet-based, grassroots exchange and collaboration platform that allows people to share ideas and then to work together to improve them in a team-building environment using wiki technology. Our vision for the Solutions Lab is to tap into the vast collective creativity of the American people to provide innovative solutions to the challenges facing America, solutions government bureaucrats cannot deliver. Furthermore, we see the Solutions Lab as a valuable resource for elected officials, who will not only have the ability to acquire ideas, but also to gain instant

feedback on their ideas outside of the scope of the 24/7 news cycle.

We are also launching “Rate Your Government,” which will bring the groundbreaking system of user ratings and feedback that made eBay so successful to citizens and their government agencies. Obviously this project will allow citizens to voice frustrations with government services, but more importantly it can surface government systems that are working so they can be emulated nationwide.

Second, for our government to truly harness the wisdom of the crowds, it must be as transparent as possible. As Peter Drucker warned thirty years ago in *The Age of Discontinuities*, government is different from the private sector. Because it is in the government’s nature to encroach on freedom and because it has the ability to coerce, higher standards of transparency and accountability are called for in government than in the private sector. The public really does have a right to know about actions that, in a totally private company, would be legitimately shielded from outside scrutiny.

In 1995, when I was sworn in as Speaker of the House, we set up the Thomas system to publish all legislation online. We named the new system of transparency after Thomas Jefferson because we knew this innovation was one which the author of the Declaration of Independence would approve.

In recent years, Congress has taken some decisive steps backward from this commitment to transparency and accountability. Campaign finance, the rise of earmarks and secret holds on nominations are just a few examples. Before the Information Age, it would have been nearly impossible to track down who introduced which earmark, who was funding which candidate and who was holding up the executive branch from filling its positions. Yet today it is just as difficult, though we proved with the Thomas system that it is possible for the public to have access to all of this information. The fact that they don’t should, and will, become less and less acceptable.

Moreover, at American Solutions, we are launching a new project called “513Connect.” 513Connect will be a collaborative, Internet-based effort to identify all 513,000 elected officials currently serving in the United States so that citizens can easily engage elected leaders.

Third, in an age of such an explosion of new science and technology, there needs to be a commitment on the part of elected officials to learn continually. At American Solutions, we want to network all 513,000 elected officials into a common learning environment. To do so, we are developing “Solutions Island,” a private, 3D Internet metaverse for elected officials to share ideas and best practices. Solutions Island will feature regular learning opportunities for elected officials to learn from each other, as well as from leading innovators and entrepreneurs of the private sector.

Imagine walking into a government office today and seeing a gaslight, a quill pen, a bottle of ink for dipping the pen, a tall clerk’s desk, and a stool. The very image of the office would communicate how out-of-date the office was. Sadly, that is the reality of today’s government, minus the outward evidence of obsolescence. To fully realize the Founders’ vision of a republic that respects the creator-endowed rights of all its citizens, this has to change. By focusing on using information technology to harness the collective intelligence of the American people to solve problems, maximizing this opportunity for Americans by committing to as transparent a government as possible, and insisting on a commitment from our elected officials to continually learn from the world that works, we will achieve a more modern government that delivers more choices of greater quality at greater convenience at lower cost. While we can’t be sure of what the Founders would have thought of our 21st-century democracy, we know that their vision for a democratic republic has survived. Today, we should harness existing technologies to further strengthen our democracy and ensure that it will endure.

About the Author

Newt Gingrich served as the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1995 to 1999 and was a member of Congress for 20 years, representing the state of Georgia. During his tenure, Gingrich was known as the chief architect of the Republican Contract with America and a key player in the Republican Party's regaining control of Congress after 40 years. Gingrich is the CEO of The Gingrich Group, an Atlanta-based communications and management-consulting firm, a distinguished visiting fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, General Chairman of American Solutions for Winning the Future (www.americansolutions.com), and a Senior Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC.