

BY PAM GREENBERG

Legislatures often find themselves on the side of fighting crime. But we've decided to turn the tables and encourage a little pilfering across state lines. We're not suggesting felonious activity, just simply stealing good ideas.

The Internet is educating, engaging and empowering citizens in ways never before possible. Legislative websites, even the most basic, have informed citizens, brought them closer to their government, provided new services, and made legislative processes more accessible and transparent.

This unscientific look at state legislative websites brings to light some great online ideas—some simple, some complex; some new and not so new; some expensive, some cheap. We hope you'll agree: Here are 25 great online ideas worth adopting.

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MINNESOTA:

THE PROPERTY TAX AND YOU

Representative Paul Marquart, chair of the Minnesota House Tax Committee's subcommittee on property taxes, set up a web page asking citizens to share their stories about how property taxes have affected them and to offer ideas for solutions. Then, the lawmakers chose from the suggestions and incorporated them into legislation. The subcommittee's web page includes links to the Minnesota Department of Revenue web page, where citizens can find out if they are eligible for a property tax refund and download a form to apply for it. The legislature's website offers a wealth of other related information as well, including simulations that provide a projection of property taxes payable under various legislative proposals compared to taxes payable under current law.

www.house.mn/df/ptax/propertytaxproject.html
www.house.leg.state.mn.us/hrd/issinfo/ptxsims.htm#POL

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HAWAII:

TESTIMONY BY EMAIL

Since 2002, Hawaii citizens have been able to submit committee testimony by email. The Legislature's Public Access Room (PAR) is both a physical room at the Capitol and

25 GREAT ONLINE IDEAS WORTH STEALING

States are using the Internet in creative, innovative ways from which other states can and should benefit.



a virtual room on the Internet. It offers an email address and instructions about what information to include when submitting testimony. The PAR site also lists schedules for workshops that cover the legislative process and information for citizen participation, and many other resources designed to provide greater access to the legislative process.

www.hawaii.gov/lrb/par

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ARIZONA:

REQUEST TO SPEAK IN COMMITTEE

The Request to Speak in Committee system replaces the printed sign-in slips for those who wish to testify in Senate and House committees. After first registering for

the system at kiosks that are located outside committee rooms, citizens who wish to testify on a bill can sign up in advance online. Committee chairpersons have electronic access to listings of everyone signed up to speak and know in advance who is for or against a particular bill.

<http://alistrack.azleg.gov/rt/login.asp>



**NEVADA:
ONLINE OPINION POLL**

The Nevada Legislature's online opinion poll has been going strong for several years now. It allows constituents to indicate whether they support or oppose a bill and why. Legislators review the opinions to find out how constituents in their districts feel about legislation. The site allows anyone to see the opinions in various formats: by popularity (the Top 50), by bill, by ZIP code, ZIP code by bill, by city, city by bill, by Senate district, Senate district by bill, by Assembly district, and by Assembly district by bill.

www.leg.state.nv.us/74th/opinions/poll



**UTAH:
BLOGGING FOR UNDERSTANDING**

The Utah Senate Majority started the Senate Site blog as a one-year pilot project in August 2005 "to see if we can add something meaningful to the way people understand and participate in the policymaking process. Worst-case scenario is that we've built a site that no one uses." That worst-case scenario never played out—the Senate site is still going strong, with daily entries by staff and members of the majority, occasional postings from members of the minority, and daily comments on those postings from intrepid citizens.

<http://senatesite.com/blog>



**KENTUCKY:
EMAIL YOUR LEGISLATOR**

Kentucky's website encourages constituents to email their legislator. The site lists all legislators by name and links to an email form for each, but it also provides a general legis-

lative "in-box," where messages are sorted by staff and directed to legislators. Another link sends a message to all legislators. A privacy statement answers questions about the confidentiality of the sender's email address.

www.lrc.state.ky.us/whoswho/email.htm



**ARIZONA:
SEARCH THOSE ARCHIVES;
UTAH:
HEAR THE DEBATES**

Arizona's website offers searchable video archives of floor actions and committee hearings—enter a bill number, or even a key word, such as "education," and the site will retrieve relevant videos. Utah's site provides audio clips for each bill. Search by keyword or bill number to retrieve a bill and you'll find links to audio recordings of excerpts from floor and committee debates relevant to the bill, among other links to bill status and votes, committee reports and minutes, and fiscal notes.

http://azleg.granicus.com/ViewPublisher.php?view_id=3

<http://le.utah.gov/~2007/html/doc/hbillhtm/ HB0010.htm>



**VERMONT AND TEXAS:
ROLL CALL VOTES**

Almost all state legislatures provide access to roll call votes on Internet sites, but some are easier to access than others. In Vermont, a link from the Legislature's home page brings citizens to a data base where they can look up all roll call votes by member name or by bill number. Texas provides a page with detailed information about how to find votes by various methods, such as by bill number, bill text, and votes by date.

www.leg.state.vt.us/database/rclist/rclist.cfm
www.capitol.state.tx.us/BillLookup/VoteInfo.aspx



**NEBRASKA:
"I'M NEW HERE..." GUIDE TO THE LEGISLATURE**

Many legislative websites have information about how a bill becomes a law, a glossary of legislative terms, and other informa-

STEPHEN URQUHART'S POLITICOPIA

Representative Steve Urquhart of Utah has created Politicopia—a wiki designed to present and gather different views on issues under consideration in the Legislature. Wikis are set up so that anyone can register and post comments or opinions and edit any entry on a site. There were more than 30 bills under discussion on the site in the 2007 legislative session.

"Legislators are talking to me about things they've read on Politicopia and saying that because of the input they've received, they've changed a position they've held for years," Urquhart says. "Already, citizens are using Politicopia to shape the debate." Senator Urquhart posted draft legislation on school vouchers to get citizen input before he introduced his bill formally.

Politicopia has generated lots of thoughtful entries—pro and con arguments, links to resources, information on opportunities for citizen action, and a place to relate personal experiences and suggest policy solutions.

Representative Urquhart has recently unveiled upgrades to Politicopia. "Imagine, he says, "if people who contribute to a government site were then able to network and strategize with other people who commented on that issue. It would be a new day for government and very empowering for citizens."

Want to see? The site is www.policopia.com.

tion about the legislative process. However, it is not always in one place or easy to find and access. Nebraska's "I'm New Here..." site offers information that helps citizens learn about the Legislature and the legislative process, tips about how to use the tools on the site to get informed about public policy issues, how to research bills and issues, and information about how to participate.

<http://nebraskalegisature.gov/web/public/immewhere>

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FLORIDA:

ONLINE SUNSHINE FOR KIDS

Many states have informative sites for kids, but Florida's kids' page shines. It is visually enticing and full of information to interest kids in learning about the legislative process. It includes games and puzzles, a virtual tour, information for prospective pages and messengers, and much more.

www.leg.state.fl.us/kids

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WEST VIRGINIA:

UP-TO-THE-MINUTE RSS FEEDS

As West Virginia's website explains it, "RSS stands for Really Simple Syndication. It is a new technology for web users that allows subscribed individuals to view up-to-the-minute information and news media." The site offers members' news releases, interim highlights, meeting schedules and the legislature's newsletter, *Wrap-Up*, through RSS feeds. Several other states offer RSS feeds for tracking actions on bills and other legislative information.

www.legis.state.wv.us/RSS/lric_rss.cfm

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WASHINGTON:

SPANISH VERSION

Spanish is the second most-common language spoken in Washington. So visitors to the legislative website there can select a Spanish version of the home page. Not everything's in Spanish, but there's enough to help Spanish speakers. In addition, TVW, the state's public affairs network that provides "gavel-to-gavel" coverage of the Legislature, is offering television coverage of political debates in Spanish this year.

www.leg.wa.gov/Legislature/homeinsessionspanish.htm?lr=1

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MICHIGAN:

LOAD IT ON YOUR PDA

For the serious political and technology junkie, some legislatures offer web pages

LINCS/NALIT ONLINE DEMOCRACY AWARD

Check out the New Jersey Legislature's site with its ease of navigation, depth of content, and openness and availability of information for the public. www.njleg.state.nj.us It's the 2007 winner of the Online Democracy Award sponsored by two NCSL staff sections, the Legislative Information and Communications Staff Section (LINCS) and the National Association of Legislative Information Technology (NALIT). Initiated in 2005, the award recognizes a state legislative website that stands out for making democracy user-friendly. A committee made up of members of the staff sections judges sites based on design, content and use of technology. Here's what they look for:

DESIGN

- ◆ Is the site easy to navigate?
- ◆ Are all links complete and images linked properly?
- ◆ Does the site load quickly and efficiently?
- ◆ Does the site and its parts follow a unifying identity and cohesive design theme?
- ◆ Is the design of the site simple enough and user friendly?

CONTENT

Does the site:

- ◆ Provide easy access to legislative bills, amendments and related documents?
- ◆ Allow easy access to state statutes and the state constitution?
- ◆ Provide citizens with user-friendly methods of interacting and communicating with their legislators?
- ◆ Give access to official proceedings (e.g., audio/video stream, transcripts, official records, etc.)?
- ◆ Provide information about legislators and their districts and help citizens identify who represents them?
- ◆ Inform about the activities of the legislature?
- ◆ Educate citizens of all ages about representative democracy and the role of their legislature?
- ◆ Have links to other useful sites and information (e.g., other government agencies, reports, NCSL, etc.)?
- ◆ Provide legislators the opportunity to share their messages with citizens and the media?
- ◆ Permit feedback from users and provide for responses to user feedback?

TECHNOLOGY

- ◆ Is the site highly searchable?
- ◆ Does the site load quickly and efficiently?
- ◆ Is the site browser neutral? Are the site's features (e.g., copies of documents, multimedia, etc.) cross-platform?
- ◆ Is the overall technology used in an appropriate manner?
- ◆ Is the technology current?
- ◆ Does the site meet accessibility standards (e.g., ADA, Section 508)?

especially designed for viewing on a handheld personal digital assistant. Michigan offers session schedules, the most recent calendar, committee bill records, and committee meetings in a small-screen viewing format.

[www.legislature.mi.gov/\(S\(m3becn34pwrspd45gw-cababp\)\)/mileg.aspx?page=milegpdainfo](http://www.legislature.mi.gov/(S(m3becn34pwrspd45gw-cababp))/mileg.aspx?page=milegpdainfo)

to customize information to an individual's specific needs. The "My Legislation" feature on the Illinois Legislature's web site gives users a way to create, store, and maintain customized lists of bills to track, along with custom queries to produce reports on legislation. South Dakota's "My Legislative Research" feature offers a unique service to citizens who want to know about changes in state laws and administrative rules. Like several other states, South Dakota citizens can sign up for email updates for bill tracking and committee information, but the web site also notifies users when bills are introduced that will modify statutes they watch. For

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ILLINOIS AND SOUTH DAKOTA:

PERSONALIZED BILL TRACKING

Every state offers access to bill status on the Internet, but many states now offer ways

example, a citizen interested in hunting laws can select the hunting statutes, and when a bill is introduced or engrossed that amends, repeals, or adds new code to that chapter, they're notified by email.

www.ilga.gov/mylegislation/getstarted.asp
www.legis.state.sd.us/mylrc/register/register.aspx

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TEXAS:

LOOKING OVER LEGISLATORS' SHOULDERS

Citizens in Texas can see the exact bills and amendments at the same time that legislators are seeing and deliberating about them. The "current amendment" web page automatically updates as legislative activity occurs in the House chamber. Tabs on the legislative website allow users to access all information about the current day's activity in the House chamber, including a scanned image of the amendment being considered; the current bill under consideration; and the House calendars for the current date.

www.capitol.state.tx.us/Search/CurrentHouseAmendment.aspx

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VIRGINIA:

CAN YOU HELP ME?

Some states have legislative hotlines staffed to answer constituent questions by phone. An updated version of these hotlines is Virginia's Live Help Service. Clicking on a "Live Help" button on the Virginia LIS Web page begins an Internet chat session with a staff member who can respond to questions about the Virginia General Assembly. Live help is available Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. After hours, a "leave a message" button sends an email to staff for a later response.

<http://leg1.state.va.us/livehelp.htm>

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WISCONSIN:

WHO REPRESENTS ME?

Front and central on the Wisconsin Legislature's website is a link to help residents find out the names of their state and federal representatives. Enter a street address, the name

WHO RATES THE STATES?



There are relatively few studies that focus on legislative websites, and groups that make awards to or rate legislative websites use different criteria when reviewing sites. However, these studies and the criteria they use provide insights into what makes a successful website.

◆ *State and Federal E-Government in the United States.* Since 2000, Darrell M. West, a professor of public policy at Brown University, has published an annual report about government websites, "State and Federal E-Government in the United States." West analyzes state and federal portal or gateway sites as well as those developed by courts, legislatures and executive agencies. Websites are evaluated for the presence of the following features: online publications, online databases, audio clips, video clips, foreign language or language translation, advertisements, premium fees, user payments or fees, disability access, privacy policies, security policies, presence of online services, email addresses, comment forms, automatic email updates, website personalization, PDA accessibility, and readability level.

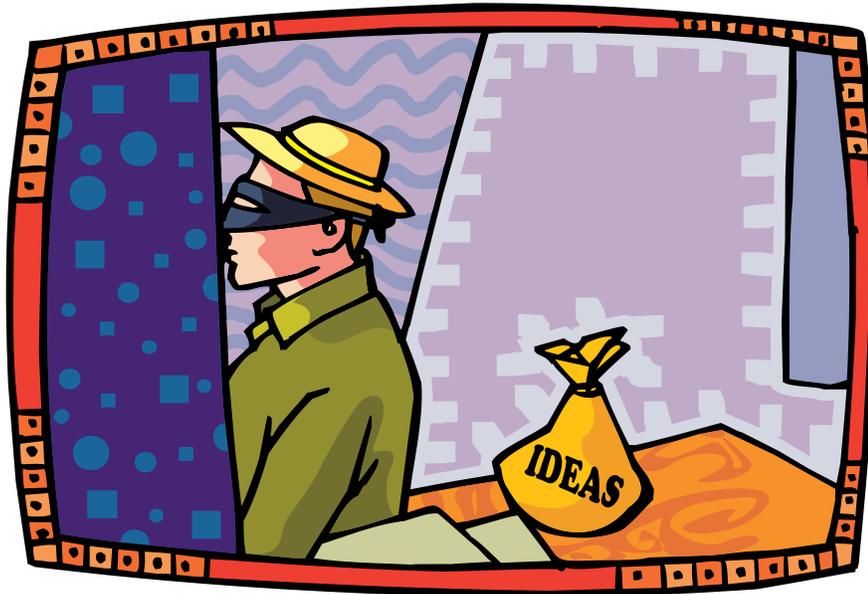
The highest ranking states in West's latest (2006) study include Texas, New Jersey, Oregon, Michigan, Utah, Montana, New York, Illinois, Indiana and Pennsylvania.

◆ *The Politics of State Legislature Websites: Making E-Government More Participatory.* In 2003, researchers at the Rochester Institute of Technology evaluated legislative websites using the following five criteria: content, usability, interactivity, transparency and audience. The paper includes detailed descriptions of specific features on legislative sites that the authors feel are likely to facilitate citizen participation and provides suggestions that the weakest-rated states could use to make improvements. The top-ranked states in the study were New Jersey, Minnesota and Alaska.

◆ *Digital Legislature Awards.* In 2002, the Center for Digital Government and Government Technology magazine created the first Digital Legislature Awards. State legislatures were ranked based on websites, and also on the following categories:

- Can citizens easily follow online the decisions made by the legislature, and direct comments and suggestions to those elected to represent their interest?
- How is computing used in the House and Senate?
- Does the public have remote access to legislative proceedings?

Arizona took the top spot in 2002, followed by Louisiana and Connecticut. In 2003, the Center's 2003 Digital Legislatures Survey "Best of Breed" report gave a first place award to the Nevada Legislature, with runners-up awards going to South Dakota and Minnesota.



of a municipality, or use interactive district maps to find the answer.

www.legis.state.wi.us
<http://waml.legis.state.wi.us>

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NORTH CAROLINA: KEEPING IT PRIVATE

People are increasingly cautious about providing personal information online, and North Carolina's privacy statement provides assurance that information collected is treated carefully. It explains exactly what information is collected and stored automatically, what security precautions are in place to protect the information collected, and an explanation of the site's use of cookies and email mailing lists.

www.ncleg.net/Etc/Privacy.html

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LOUISIANA HOUSE: VIRTUAL TOUR

For citizens who can't visit the Capitol, some states offer a virtual tour. The Louisiana House provides a wonderful video tour that also has captions for those who have trouble hearing.

http://house.louisiana.gov/H_Citizens/H_Citizens_VirtualTourMain.htm

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MISSOURI SENATE: PODCASTS

The Missouri Senate Communications Office provides a weekly, condensed one-minute podcast of current Senate events. The office also posts short audio and video clips from Senate committee hearings, floor debate, press conferences and other legislative events, accompanied by a short description of each podcast. Video programs that bring legislators from both sides of the aisle together to discuss their positions on pending legislation are also available along with a series of news interviews with lawmakers and stories on state issues.

www.senate.mo.gov/05info/press-room/radio.html

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PENNSYLVANIA: LEGISLATION ARCHIVES

Pennsylvania offers legislative historians a gold mine of information on legislation, with bills dating back to the 1969-70 session.

www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/home/session.cfm

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SOUTH CAROLINA: EASY SEARCH

South Carolina offers great options for searching. A Quick Search feature lets you easily search legislation, the budget, the Code of Laws, the Code of Regulations, the

Constitution, House and Senate Journals, bill summaries, or the full site, all without leaving the home page. The Legislature's Multi-Criteria Search provides a step-by-step path to narrow a search. After getting results in an initial search, the user is prompted to select additional search criteria. The feature makes it easier to find bills dealing with a very specific topic, and a user's multi-criteria searches can be saved to run updates the next time the site is visited.

www.scstatehouse.net

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CALIFORNIA STATE LEGISLATURE PORTAL: ACCESSIBILITY

California's legislative portal bears three logos indicating compliance with the W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. The site also links to California's Accessibility Guide, which provides help for designing accessible websites for people with vision, hearing and mobility problems or learning disabilities.

www.legislature.ca.gov

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IDAHO: MEET THE BUDGET PROCESS

Idaho provides a clear introduction to the budget process, including a budget flow chart, the text of statutes and rules related to the budget process, and an overview of state budget processes generally. It links to information about the Joint Finance-Appropriations Committee. But the site doesn't stop there—it provides many detailed documents and web pages with fiscal facts and budget analyses.

www.legislature.idaho.gov/budget/budgetprocess.htm

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NEW JERSEY: SITE MAP AND EASY NAVIGATION

The New Jersey Legislature website is loaded, but a site map makes it easy to navigate. The design and links, including a "help" link, a list of FAQs and information about new features, round out a very usable site.

www.njleg.state.nj.us/legislativepub/sitemap.asp