Gregory Ferenstein

Ironically, technology has radically democratized nearly every social institution and industry except democracy itself. A handful among us are pioneering ways to bring transparency and interactivity to the process of self-government. On the eve of America's political new year, Election Day, we highlight this year's most innovative people in democracy.

TITANS

Barack Obama

Once described by a senior advisor as having a "high geek quotient," the most powerful man in the world has made innovative governance one of his cherished side projects. Before he was even elected, Obama's groundbreaking use of social media secured him the Democratic nomination against a formidable insider. As President, one of his first executive orders created a senior level position tasked with developing creative technological solutions to problems of the federal government. The unprecedented opening of government data, YouTube town halls, and tracking federal spending online have been hallmarks of the Obama presidency.

Eric Schmidt

Each one of the Google billionaire founders have their own mad scientist pet projects. Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt has directed his own army of Googlers toward the cause of Internet transparency, accessibility and social welfare. Google Ideas develops tools to prevent epidemics, disrupt illicit trade networks of weapons and slaves, and monitor election fraud. While admitting that Google's policy of engagement with China was not successful, it seems to be working within the authoritarian Middle East, where Googlers played an important role in the Arab Spring, and demand for Gmail dampened Iran's Internet censorship plans.

Toomas Hendrik Ilves

Estonia President Ilves ("ill-viss") presides over the most technologically advanced democracy on Earth: citizens vote online, enjoy universal access to medical records, and can perform most government services without leaving their laptops (Estonians filed their taxes online long before it was popular in the U.S.). So impressed with Estonia's track record, the European Union now consults him on how to rework its own fledgling attempts at an electronic medical sysem.

Congressman Darrell Issa (CrunchGov Grade: A)

Better known for being Obama's conservative arch-rival as chairman of the House Oversight Committee, Congressman Darrell Issa moonlights as a champion of bleeding-edge legislative innovation. As an engineer and former President of the Consumer Electronics Association, he personally helped develop Congress's first legislative crowdsourcing utility, Project Madison. He also live-streams every Oversight hearing and is developing ways for the public to interact with members of Congress during the otherwise opaque process of subcommittee meetings (where most legislation gets written). If that weren't enough, he also introduced the DATA Act, a bill to make all federal funding trackable online. Proof of his nerd cred: The day he indicted Attorney General Eric Holder for contempt, he was at a wonky open government conference, the Personal Democracy Forum, while every political reporter was begging for access to him.

Julian Assange

Few journalists can inspire mass fear in both dictators and first-world leaders with the mere mention of a pending story. As founder and Editor-in-Chief of Wikileaks, he has pushed the boundaries of government transparency, and, in his own anarchical, brute-force way, proved that liberated information can do more to advance democracy than decades of back-door diplomacy. His unwieldy methods have endangered lives and tossed the Middle East into uncertainty, but his stamp on history and the future of media cannot be denied.

HOMETOWN HEROES

Cory Booker

Newark Mayor and part time superhero, Cory Booker, has redefined what it means to hold executive office in the age of social media. Booker's million-strong Twitter feed spouts everything from dense nuggets of inspiration to real-time problem-solving with his constituents. Famously, he shoveled Newark driveways in response to tweets of help during a snowstorm. This Fall, Booker debuted a new social media platform, #waywire, as well as details on Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg's $100 million gift to Newark's school system. Booker's remarkable eloquence in 140 characters could do to Twitter what Shakespeare did to the once drab English language.

Michael Bloomberg

The outspoken media mogul and New York Mayor has committed the Big Apple to digital openness. Antiquated telephone booths are being transformed into public Wi-Fi; Chief Digital Officer Rachel Hoat has been charged with opening up government data; and the city was among the first to invite civic hackers to develop better city services. The mayor has overseen quite possibly the most innovative program in public education, P-Tech, a five-year high school that awards an associates STEM degree and a path to favored employment at a partner technology firm (New York's P-Tech first partnered with IBM).

Tony Hsieh

The soft-spoken CEO of Zappos has committed a whopping $350 million of his own piggy bank to create a model city in the dingy center of downtown Vegas. Hsieh's rather simple idea is that community brings out the best in humanity. Indeed, one of Political Science's most famous studies, conducted by Harvard's Robert Putnam, found that prosperity, health, and government efficiency was dependent on the density of citizens' informal interactions (book clubs, bowling leagues, etc). Hsieh is terraforming downtown Vegas for friendship and serendipity, where

coffee shops and a thriving tech scene inspire locals to share knowledge. Should Hsieh be successful, his easily replicable model could have an extraordinary global impact.

Jennifer Pahlka

To someone holding a hammer, everything looks like a nail. To Code For America Founder Jennifer Pahlka, who holds an army of civic hackers, every frustratingly poor government service is just a line of code away from fixing. Code For America has been hailed as the 21st century version of the Peace Corps, where programmers take up residency in a city and dedicate time to finding technological solutions to local government problems. They have recently expanded into the nascent civic startup space, a new industry based on providing state services better than the government can do alone. May this new industry thrive.

GLOBAL CITIZENS

Alec Ross

As America's premier digital diplomat, Hillary Clinton's senior technology advisor has overseen many watershed moments in technology and democracy: his team contacted Twitter to postpone maintenance during the Iranian uprising and championed text donations for Haitian earthquake relief (which raised somewhere north of $32 million). In addition to greatly expanding embassy outreach and local tech sector development, the State Department has boldly partnered with companies developing anti-authoritarian tools, such as a panic-button for cell phones that automatically wipes incriminating content during government raids. In the controversial U-turn from cowboy diplomacy under Bush to global citizenship under Obama, Ross has been the tip of the digital spear in the advancement of global interdependence.

Pirate Party

They're less fun than a boat full of drunken sailors, but more influential in Germany than many third parties are in the United States. After winning 15 parliamentary seats in Germany, the Pirate Party has developed an intriguing crowdsourced platform of decision-making known as "liquid feedback." The trust-based voting system permits members to leave decision-making to those they know are more knowledgeable, while preserving the inclusiveness of direct democracy. The Pirate Party is currently expanding its ranks throughout the globe.

DEMOCRATIC SCIENTISTS

Tiago Peixoto

As one of the foremost authorities on digital direct democracy, Peixoto (pe'-sho-to), the Brazilian World Bank consultant, has helped Brazil discover the secrets of successful online participatory budgeting and wiki-legislation. The Internet, theoretically, holds the key to mass involvement in policymaking, not seen since Democracy began as a humble community experiment in the rolling hills of Athens, Greece. Unfortunately, crowds can be as spiteful, partisan, and stupid as they can benevolent, open-minded, and brilliant. Peixoto's research is paving the way for technology to bring out the better parts of democracy.

James Fowler

When everyone else waxes philosophical about the benefits of interconnectedness, James Fowler, a professor of medical genetics and political science at the University of California, San Diego, is developing the scientific framework to measure it. The Connected co-author is the only researcher to have employed sound experimental research to prove that Facebook, in fact, has a meaningful impact on voter turnout.

MEDIA PIONEERS

Jason Russell

Thanks to the co-founder of anti-child soldier nonprofit, Invisible Children, the most viral video in Internet history has no cats, pop stars, or drugged-up children. "Kony 2012" ultimately led President Obama to sign military authorization to go after infamous Ugandan warlord, Joseph Kony. Nor were Invisible Children one-hit wonders: In 2009, Invisible Children utilized social media to organize a sit-in outside Senator Tom Coburn's office, which unblocked Congressional legislation for military action. After a debilitating public meltdown that would have paralyzed an ordinary organization, Russell and his team have resurfaced and are planning on marching in D.C.

Jason Rzepka

MTV's Senior Vice President of Public Affairs is charged with activating America's most apathetic demographic: 18-29 year olds. With a global audience of half-a-billion youngsters, MTV's social good arm is perhaps the only institution that can turn this otherwise political inconsequential group into a powerhouse. This year, Rzepka revamped the old "Choose or Lose" campaign for a Fantasy Football-style game, "Fantasy Election", where users compete with friends to assemble rag-tag virtual teams of honest, substantive, and popular candidates. More recently, he coordinated a Presidential interview, fielding questions from MTV's massive Facebook followers.

SUPER STAFFERS

Matt Lira

Majority Leader Eric Cantor's senior advisor, Matt Lira, has an infectious optimism for how technology can make Congress more responsive to the people. Under Lira's admirable bi-partisan lobbying, Congress has agreed to place legislation online for three days prior to voting, has experimented with direct democracy through cell phones (YouCut), and is on the verge of releasing vital legislative data for use by government watchdogs. Congress and Silicon

Valley have become closer, literally, because Lira has helped organize frequent trips to Northern California for the Republican leadership and organized a Facebook developers conference inside the Capitol building.

Team Obama
Macon Phillips

When Obama tweets, Macon Phillips is likely nearby. As White House Director of New Media, he's gotten the president to embrace social media as a more direct alternative to the otherwise exclusive circles of the White House press corp. Petition platform WeThePeople binds the White House to give official response to popular questions, and Obama has personally responded to users on Google+, Reddit, and YouTube.

Todd Park

America's most enthusiastic bureaucrat and second Chief Technology Officer came out of the gate swinging, launching five programs just months after being appointed by President Obama: an electronic fund transfer system for foreign aid, a small-business-friendly government procurement process, and an expansion of open government datasets for health, safety, and education. Mindful of the transient nature of White House gigs, he set up a (potentially) permanent program for White House fellows to continue innovative tech work regardless of who holds power.

Steven VanRoekel

The federal Chief Information Officer wants the government to function like tech giants, directing agencies to develop guidelines around prize-based innovation and open data. In some cases, the Silicon Valley-ification of government will come by brute force: VanRoekel has set up a hiring system to flood agencies with young tech-savvy employees.

Seamus Kraft

Behind Congressmen Darrell Issa's groundbreaking open government agenda is Digital Director Seamus Kraft. On top working on legislation to make federal spending transparent, making room for open source software in the government, and helping to liberate congressional data, he's now heading up the Open Government Foundation to spread Project Madison, a crowdsourcing legislative utility, throughout Congress.

Snooki

The controversial reality star exposed millions of civically apathetic TV-watchers to the world of politics during a frank Twitter exchange with former presidential candidate, Senator John McCain. More importantly...we're just kidding.

As with any list, we surely left out many brilliant people. Please list any notable individuals in the comments below. May next year's list be even harder to compile.

Original article on the TechCrunch [webpage](#) .