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Grove - An Accountability Project
Project Overview

Introduction and Synopsis

It is increasingly apparent that there are common divergences between the actions of leadership and the perspectives of the people they speak for. More often than not, we don't know whether the actions of our leaders match up with the beliefs of the people they represent.

We want to make this information transparent and available to all--and that's why we are creating a tool where citizens and our leaders can learn about each others' thoughts and actions, forge new movements, and share ideas with the common goal of building a better future.

Grove is a project that hopes to reinvigorate democratic communication by creating a nonprofit web and mobile platform for civil public deliberation, where the opinions and actions of citizens and our leaders are presented side-by-side to highlight the places where leaders are unaccountable to the public, and to allow everyday citizens a more prominent voice in decision-making.

This document is an in-depth explanation of our vision and plan, organized as follows: first, we will lay out the goals of the project and the theory behind what we think needs to happen. We will then explain the details of what we are actually trying to build, how we envision our project functioning, and how it is different from existing projects. After that, we will give some more background on our team, and we will provide a very rough plan for the project. Information about getting involved is at the end of the document.

We are happy to answer any questions or provide more detail over email (aman.patel@usc.edu), and any thoughts, suggestions, or feedback would be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in volunteering, please also get in contact using the above email address. You can also sign up for our mailing list here, and look at our project website.

Project Goals

This project is guided by three overarching goals:
1. To ensure that the leaders of organizations and institutions remain accountable to both their members and the general public.
2. To foster nuanced public discussion of complex social issues, with a focus on generating new ideas, improvements on existing ideas, and compromises between conflicting groups.
3. To enable decentralized groups of people who share similar ideas to coordinate their actions for bottom-up change.

For the first goal, we define "accountability" as a healthy balance between democratic input and expert judgment--the public should be a central component of decision-making, and leaders should generally face strong incentives to represent the beliefs and interests of their constituents, but there should also be wiggle room for leaders to break with the public if there are good-enough reasons to do so. More robust forces of democracy are desirable, but it is also important to prevent this tool from becoming a breeding ground for populism. For this reason, we chose to focus on developing a platform to enhance conversations about the actions of leaders and institutions, rather than trying to create a mechanism for direct democracy.

The second goal is naturally limited in scope, since "public discussion" encompasses most human communication, in some form or another. Instead of trying to change the nature of "public discussion" in general, we are instead concentrating on providing an inclusive, easily-accessible space for people to express and discuss their thoughts--and we are developing new moderation techniques to keep the conversation constructive, as is explained later in this document.

The third goal stems from a side benefit of our answer to the first two goals: we realized that our proposed platform could be easily leveraged to offer local advocacy groups an opportunity to collaborate with other advocacy groups in different regions, and to share knowledge, campaigns, and resources. This goal is not as central to the project as the other two, but we think that it would nonetheless be valuable to help build up an infrastructure to turn grassroots efforts into larger-scale change.

We can further break down the goals of the project into the benefits it seeks to provide for different stakeholders. This project will seek to provide citizens:

1. A platform for civil, constructive, and nuanced deliberation of social and political issues, designed to encourage continuous improvement on ideas.

2. An opportunity to re-engage in the democratic process by expressing opinions in a way that could visibly contribute to policy change.
3. A summary of where their leaders broke with public opinion, and how well their leaders are representing them.
4. A tool for connecting with other grassroots groups to share information and coordinate campaigns.

It will provide leaders:

5. An easily accessible place to clearly see what their constituents think about specific issues.
6. A source of information to help adapt better to social movements or changing public demands.
7. A tool for communicating en masse with their constituents.
8. An opportunity to explain their decisions to their constituents.

Theory

In order to hold anyone accountable for anything, one must have some sort of control over something that person desires. Without such control, nobody would have any external incentive to act how others want them to. Different categories of leaders have different root goals, and therefore face different incentive landscapes--but luckily, the public has control over the root desires of most types of leaders.

The main goals of public, elected, or community officials are usually a mix of the following: serving their constituents, promoting their ideology through policy, gaining power, and making money.

For leaders who truly prioritize serving their constituents, the barriers to accountability are often informational and structural. Information about public opinion on national hot-button issues may be widely available, but polling data at lower levels of government or in different forms of organizations is much more scarce, especially for mundane topics. It can be prohibitively costly and inconvenient for an elected official representing a smaller constituency to obtain accurate information about public opinion.

A lack of information can create compounding barriers when considered in the context of organizational structure. As an example, representatives in partisan legislatures may face high costs for voting against their party, such as being given poor committee assignments or losing re-election support from party leadership. Without clear evidence of their constituency's beliefs, representatives may not be able to present their party leadership with a reason for their vote that is strong enough to avoid punishment.

For leaders who prioritize anything else, their ability to meet their goals hinges, in most cases, on re-election--and since the public retains control over re-election, it is a clear target for increasing accountability.

If the public already has this power, though, why is non-accountability an issue in the first place? Outside of electoral system structure, there seem to be two main reasons, both centered around a lack of transparency: 1) voters are largely unaware of how their representatives vote on issues that they find important, and 2) representatives are often unaware of public opinion. The first reason explains why we find ourselves re-electing politicians who don't follow our views: we are often only aware of how they voted on flashy issues with lots of press coverage, even though those issues might not be our primary concerns. The second reason explains why even good-natured representatives may fail to accurately represent the public. Without clear evidence of their constituency's beliefs, representatives may not have a good enough reason to break with their party. Since representatives can face high costs for breaking with their party (especially in terms of re-election support from party leadership), representatives face no incentives to vote counter to their party unless there is enough strong evidence to show that their constituents believe otherwise.

Leaders of private organizations will often have slightly different goals than elected officials or community leaders. Most leaders of for-profit corporations are expected to add value for shareholders, grow the business, and gain investors, while also making money for themselves, and incorporating corporate social responsibility. Nonprofit leaders face a similar incentive landscape, except with more focus on social welfare, and fundraising to replace profit-making.

As with elected officials, the public has some control over these desires. Private organizations rely on the public for their income, giving consumers the power to constrain how these corporations act. Boycotts, for example, enable the public to temporarily cut off a chunk of a corporation's income, prompting it to negotiate or comply with the public's demands. Even if only a small portion of the public takes issue with the corporation, the potential damage to the corporation's brand may be threatening enough for the corporation to change their actions.

As with re-election, though, boycotting is not being utilized to its full potential as a tool for accountability. There are powerful examples of boycotts creating momentous change, but most consumers do not have the time or attention necessary to boycott *all* corporations who have taken actions that they disapprove of. There are far too many corporations in the world for consumers to pay attention to, especially given the time and effort required to

learn about and act on each concern individually. Instead, it would be beneficial for citizens to express their general attitudes simultaneously to a class of related corporations, saving significant amounts of time and energy, and empowering busy citizens to contribute to movements they care about. Many people also feel that petitions and boycotts are generally not effective anyway, and therefore don't actively seek out opportunities to engage in them. It might thus be necessary to rebuild confidence that civic action can actually make a difference, as advocacy groups constantly try to do.

Based on this rough analysis, we can identify a few things that need to happen if our goals are to be met:
- Leaders will need to have convenient access to information about public opinion.
- Citizens will need a convenient means to contribute their opinions so that leaders will listen.
- The amount of information and attention flowing into existing incentive mechanisms will need to be enhanced.

In other words, information about the beliefs of citizens and the actions of leaders needs to be compiled side-by-side into a single location, so that leaders can see what their citizens think and citizens can see clearly where their leaders acted against their wishes. Crucially, the latter component ensures that leaders will have a reason to pay attention to citizens' opinions: armed with this previously-obscure knowledge, citizens are empowered to take action against the leaders that represent them poorly, by voting them out or refusing to support their business.

Project Output

Considering the essential factors listed above, we decided to achieve the goals of this project with a web and mobile application, since online services are accessible, convenient, and frequently used, and are ideal for facilitating more efficient flows of information across a wide number of people. The app will function doubly as a communication platform and as an information source, with the following features:

Users

- Users can create accounts on their own, or they can be invited by organizations to use the platform. Once a user has an account set up, they can request to become a member of more organizations. Organizations will have the option of verifying member requests through email, to make sure that users are who they say they are. Down the line, the users' physical addresses may be verified with postcards, to

ensure that government organizations (which, in our terminology, would include cities or states) only have true residents as members.

- When creating an account, each user may also contribute optional demographic data to their profile, to be used in data analysis and statistics.
- Eventually, we are planning to set up a process where users could petition to be designated as "experts" in a field, to add credence to viewpoints (which we will get to later).
- Upon login, each user will be presented with a dashboard, summarizing new announcements, new activity on followed issues, and issue pages that might be of interest to the user.

Organizations

- Organizations are the main unit of analysis for the platform. Each organization will have an "internal" and "external" side--internal sides accessible only to members of that organization, and external sides accessible to the general public.
- Internal sides will host issue pages (described below) that are relevant to the organization's internal functioning, as well as a "workspace" containing announcements and shared links. A student government, for example, might have an internal side accessible only to students of that university, containing issue pages about funding and academic integrity policies, announcements about school-wide events and updates, and a list of links for contacting different offices.
- External sides will have a similar structure, but the issue pages and announcements will be accessible to the wider community. These might be employed more frequently by corporations, whose actions are more relevant to the general public.
- Organizations can also have other organizations as members, and the issue pages and workspace can be used to share knowledge and information about the actions of member organizations. This enables local advocacy groups to connect with other local groups in different regions, to mount collective campaigns and increase their impact. This feature could also be utilized by leaders in the same field, to share information about techniques, successes, and failures, and to coordinate policy trials and research. In a different vein, we also envision this feature being used to classify private corporations by industry, so that citizens can express their ideas or concerns to all players in the industry simultaneously.

Leaders

- Each organization will also have a set of "leaders." Leaders can have different roles, but all of them must possess some decision-making power. Each leader will have a page summarizing their actions, as well as an index describing how much their actions diverged from the community opinion. The page will also give citizens a

space to signal their approval or disapproval of the leader, to construct an approval rating.
- [Potential addition] Leaders may also conduct "action polls," where they propose a potential action and their constituents can respond with their support or opposition for that idea.

Issue Pages

- Citizens can add "issue pages" under specific organizations to start a discussion about a topic or problem relevant to that organization. Any member of an organization can create one on the internal side, and anyone can create one on the external side, as long as the issue at hand is distinct from already-existing issue pages.
- Other citizens can add a short summary of their opinion on each issue page (which we call a "viewpoint"), along with a longer explanation with more evidence and reasoning to back up the viewpoint.
- If their thoughts are similar to an already-existing viewpoint, citizens can support other people's viewpoints in a way similar to upvoting a post on a forum. In the spirit of approval voting, citizens will be able to support multiple viewpoints under the same issue.
- Citizens can also reply to each others' viewpoints, in order to improve on each others' ideas or arguments, or to raise new points that weren't addressed earlier. Replies will have a similar structure for upvoting, and the original author of the viewpoint can choose to edit their viewpoint based on the discussion in the replies. Citizens can choose to make their viewpoints, support, and replies anonymous, if they so desire.
- To prevent spamming and to prevent discussion from becoming aggravated, citizens will only be able to add one viewpoint for each issue page, and will not be able to reply to others' viewpoints until a certain amount of time has passed since their last activity on that issue page.
- Each issue page will also display a visual presentation of support for the different viewpoints, as well as a rough estimate of the general distribution of public opinion on the issue (based on the demographics of users who supported viewpoints on this issue). Anyone will be able to gain a quick understanding of what their community thinks about the issue--a feature critical for improving the clarity of public opinion. To prevent groupthink, the visual presentation may not be shown until the user expresses their support for an existing viewpoint, or signals that they are unsure. If the "expert" feature is rolled out, citizens will be able to see the experts and organizations that support each viewpoint, as well as the number of everyday citizens.

- New issue pages can be created for specific bills, measures, or actions relevant to general issues and topics. This allows for the conceptual discussion of a problem to be quickly applied to a concrete proposal for addressing that problem, and allows citizens to give their input on the strengths and flaws of those proposals.
- If a leader of that organization takes an action relevant to an issue, like voting on a related bill, that action will be displayed on the issue page, and citizens will be able to signal their approval or disapproval of that action. The data for these actions will either be automatically retrieved from public databases (like congress.gov) or contributed by citizens. In the latter case, citizens will need to provide a reputable link for the source of their information, so that the information can be verified.
- Leaders will have the opportunity to post an explanation for their action, to describe their reasoning to their constituents. This feature hopes to spark a two-way dialogue between leaders and their constituents, rather than one-way demands.
- Issue pages can be quickly shared through email or social media, so that citizens can ask each other to contribute to the conversation. Users can also "follow" issue pages that they care about, to get updates on new activity.
- In the future, we may add a feature where citizens can rate how important they consider each issue page to be, so that leaders can focus their energies on the issues that matter most to their constituents.

Moderation

- Ensuring civil and constructive discourse is a key challenge for this project, so strong community moderation procedures are necessary. The timed reply function mentioned earlier is one feature meant to keep discussion constructive, and more
- For the external sides of organizations, moderation will begin with a community-defined set of rules and policies for conduct, revisable by community voting.
- There will be a flagging system for content that violates the community policies, and a flagging system for identifying viewpoints or issue pages that are not significantly different from others. Any user can flag a post that they think violates the community standards.
- To make judgments on flagged content, there will be a rotating review board of active users to act as a "jury," possibly randomly sampled to ensure demographic and ideological diversity. To be qualified as a jury member, users must not have had any past policy violations, and must be a frequent viewer or poster. These juries will be charged with upholding the community's standards, and will be the prime peacekeeping force of the platform.
- For their internal side, organizations may choose to adopt this community policy, along with community moderation, or they can set up their own systems.

Example of Functionality

It is probably easiest to understand how the platform will work with a concrete example. We will consider the Emerald City government as our organization. A citizen notices that the roads in Emerald City needed repair, so she adds a page devoted to discussing this issue. Let's say she also contributes her viewpoint to the page, arguing that the city government should fix the roads. She shares the page with her friends, who all lend their name to support her viewpoint.

Some other citizens, however, disagree. They think that the city government should spend its limited money on the more crucial problems of public health. One of these citizens posts this viewpoint to the page, and some other people browsing the page add their names to his viewpoint. A few crafty think tank researchers devise a third option: instead of spending public funds to work on road repair, the city could privatize its road system. They post this to the issue page, and garner support for it on the platform by mentioning the idea in their newsletter. As this issue is heating up in the community and a few more unique viewpoints are added, the platform is busy calculating estimates of what public opinion on the issue looks like.

The issue soon becomes popular enough that the Emerald City Council starts paying attention. One councilmember introduces a bill to allocate more funding to road repair, with some specific measures that are also contentious. Somebody adds an issue page for this bill, which extends the more general discussion on the road repair page. This new page sparks a few viewpoints, now that the issue is directly relevant to taxpayer money.

Data from the viewpoints suggested that most residents were in favor of the bill, except for those in the poorest district, who were unhappy that the bill offered little money for road repair in their neighborhood. The councilmember from this district wanted to vote for the bill, but her chief of staff saw that her constituents passionately opposed the bill. She knew that, if she voted for the bill, a local watchdog organization would input the voting results to the platform, which would then calculate an index to describe how much the city council members diverged from their constituencies when voting. This would mean that many of her constituents would get a notification on their phones that their leader diverged sharply from their views—ruining her re-election chances. To prevent this from happening, she brokered a compromise deal with the other council members that addressed her constituency's concerns.

Comparison to Existing Projects

It's a worthwhile question to explore how this platform will be different from existing options, especially since there are so many established platforms that have overlapping functionality with this project. There are a few different classes of existing platforms that may be similar: online polling and petition sites, social media, direct voting systems, and leader activity-compilation sites. This project will attempt to extract the successful components of these services, combining them into a single platform:

- Online polling and petition-making websites have proven to be powerful ways of gathering signatures, but they don't have any built-in way to incentivize leaders to respond to them. This project will incorporate the features of online petition sites that allow movements to spread quickly, but will also add features that give those movements teeth.
- Social media platforms feature similar spaces for discussion, but they lack the focus and purpose that this platform is hoping to achieve. This platform will keep discussion centered around discussing, solving, and preventing concrete problems.
- Direct voting systems, enabled by abundant internet connections, are employed in some municipalities to allow citizens to use their personal phones or computers to vote on public matters. This project, however, is not intended to be used for direct voting: rather, it is meant to allow citizens to share their opinions and deliberate on issues, and to allow leaders to clearly see how their citizens feel. Users may "vote" by adding their name to viewpoints, but this is closer to an informal expression of opinion than a true vote.
- There are many sites that compile publicly-available data, and offer citizens a clean presentation of how their leaders have been acting. While these are quite useful tools, they are merely a passive knowledge resource rather than an active accountability mechanism. This project will offer a similar presentation of how leaders act, but will combine it with citizen-contributed viewpoints to show citizens where their leaders broke with them.

The unique purpose and combination of features that this project possesses sets it apart from these existing services, so we are confident that we are not reinventing the wheel, but instead developing a new tool that doesn't yet exist.

By incorporating elements from each of these classes of organizations, citizens will be able to condense much of their civic activity into a unified place, giving them more time to focus on issues, and rendering each of their actions more impactful. Leaders will also benefit from having a unified place to learn about their constituents' thoughts and communicate with the public.

Project Team

Currently, we are operating with a small group of a couple dedicated volunteers, and we are seeking to add some more people to the team.

I have a background in politics, research, and nonprofit settings, and other team members have deep experience in business leadership and software architecture in both startups and established organizations. Together, we have a network spanning advocacy, research, and charity nonprofits, multiple private corporations in different industries, and actors at all levels of government, including city council members, state officials, and former congresspeople.

As is, we are confident that this project will not lose momentum or fall apart, but we think that it would be much stronger with the additional support of a few more tenacious volunteers.

A Brief Project Plan

Below is a rough outline of the plan for this project. Right now, we are between stages 0 and 1. We're working on getting feedback on the idea, finding people interested in helping, and developing a very basic proof of concept.

Stage 0: We will ask experts and community members for feedback on the idea, and any suggestions for improvements. We will also engage in "market" research in order to determine whether citizens and leaders would use such a platform, and how often they believe they would do so.

Stage 1: In this stage, we will recruit volunteers to help build the minimum viable platform for this project. It is expected that the MVP will take 3-5 months to develop, depending on the size of the volunteer force. Building this platform is within the capabilities of a small but dedicated team of volunteers, since longer development timelines are not a concern at the moment.

The MVP will likely contain the core features of the platform: issue pages for organizations, viewpoint contributions, and displays of community-inputted information on leader actions. Since these features are the most critical for reaching the project's goals, we think that they will constitute enough to complete a first test and evaluation of the project. We will replace many of the bells and whistles of the full version with simpler implementations: as examples, member validation will likely be based only on email address, moderation will

likely be completed by designated users, and organization announcements and workspaces will either be omitted or limited to simple text. Trimming these additional features will allow us to build a basic release-ready platform in a shorter amount of time, with fewer people. More embellishments can be added later on, with a larger team or more external support.

Stage 2a: Once the MVP is built, we will target university student governments for a trial of this platform. Student governments were chosen because of their engaged constituencies, medium size, and dynamic challenges, but other settings may be appropriate too. Based on the network of our team members, we will seek to work with ~10 different student governments to roll out the basic platform for a semester, invite their students as members, and engage in intra-university marketing to make students aware of the new opportunity to share their concerns or ideas with their leaders. This stage will likely take 3-5 months to complete, following the 3-5 month development period.

Based on feedback from this trial, we will evaluate the project's performance thus far, and improve the platform as needed.

Stage 2b: We will then target local governments and citizens' groups and encourage them to use this platform to include more citizens into their discussions, again based on the collective network of our team.

Many local governments are seeking to increase citizen engagement, and may be more willing to test out new technologies than other sorts of organizations. At the same time, advocacy groups are constantly trying to get the attention of their local governments, and they are likely to find value in this project. In this stage, we will simultaneously work with the local government and existing advocacy groups of one or two cities at a time, concentrating our efforts on building active local communities of users. Our goal with this strategy is to seed multiple pockets of engagement as small examples of how the project could function at a larger scale. This approach is also designed to circumvent a potential concern with the project's implementation: most citizens will not take interest in the platform unless they think their voices will be heard, but leaders will not take interest until a substantial number of their constituents are using it. If only one of these groups is targeted, usage of the platform might fizzle out quickly. By initially focusing our marketing on specific local governments and advocacy groups at the same time, though, we'll be able to offer citizens and activists assurance that leaders will pay attention to the platform, and we will be able to show leaders that their constituents are engaged on the platform.

This stage might take six months to a year to complete, depending on the enthusiasm of local organizations and our internal capacity to work on outreach. We will continuously conduct more evaluation and improvement rounds, as the user base of the platform grows.

Stage 3: Once there is an established user base in local communities, we will expand to other levels of government and types of organizations through social networks and additional targeted outreach. This stage is not well-defined quite yet, since it will depend heavily on the evolution of the project, but we expect that it will follow from the combination of natural spread and focused marketing.

For a short summary of the tentative timeline: if we can have a working product built by May 2021, we can spend the summer months setting up partnerships with institutions for our first trial round, starting in August or September. We can then assess and improve in December 2021, and roll out our second trial round in January 2022.

<u>Funding and Finance</u>

At least initially, this project will be volunteer-run, so there will be little need for external funds. As the project grows, there will be technology and maintenance costs involved, mostly pertaining to building the website and app.

There are two major options for funding:

1. The platform could fund itself through donations from users and grantmaking organizations. This might be the best source of initial funding, while the project is still ramping up.
2. The platform can also fund itself by offering additional "premium" features and data analytics to campaigns, lobbyists, corporations, or government offices. This is a better option for down the road, when the platform has traction.

If the project shows continued promise during Stage 2a (which we'll do our best to make happen), we are expecting to incorporate as a nonprofit organization. Most likely, we will then search for private grants to cover increasing technology costs, using the data we collect in the trial runs to make a case for the value of the project. Contingent on our success in the grant search, we may also seek to hire a limited number of paid software engineers and nonprofit development staff to expand the functionality and reach of the platform, especially if the project takes off faster than a volunteer team can keep up with. This paid team would also be charged with implementing our second funding option, transitioning the nonprofit to a self-sufficient state.

<u>Project Evaluation</u>

This project could be evaluated according to a few key metrics: 1) user count, 2) quality of public discussion, and 3) self-reported user feedback. Most obviously, this project would be increasingly successful the more people use it. At least initially, user count will be the main metric. Once discussion picks up, it is foreseeable that *quality* will matter. Is the platform

doing a good job of keeping discussion civil? Is there actually any fruitful deliberation happening? We can eventually supplement these metrics with feedback from users: do they think it is helping them make more informed decisions at the ballot? Do leaders factor insights from the platform into their decisions?

These questions are a sampling of the many that could be asked in order to measure the success of the project. More concrete evaluation metrics will be established more clearly as the platform takes shape, as well as plans for gathering and using feedback to guide the project.

Getting Involved

If you are interested in this idea, we would love to talk with you! Everyone is welcome (and encouraged) to get in contact, especially people who would be willing to help create and grow this project. Here are some of the specific skills that would be particularly helpful to us at the moment:

- Web or mobile development skills of all types
    - Front-end development (we're using Flutter)
    - Back-end development
    - Software architecture
- Marketing expertise
- Nonprofit experience, in operations, fundraising, or otherwise
- Legal knowledge
- Experience as an elected official or as a leader of a large company, nonprofit, or community group

If you have questions or suggestions, or are interested in helping, you can send us an email at aman.patel@usc.edu. All thoughts are appreciated. To stay updated, you can also sign up for our mailing list here.

Thanks!