



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on September 2, 2011

White House Developing Online Petitions Webpage Called We the People

This new government tool will be available at the White House website, and it is "a new way to petition your government to take action on a range of important issues," [says](#) the narrator in a White House video. "It's a new way for your voice to be heard in our government," Macon Phillips, the White House director of digital strategy, suggested.



"When I ran for this office, I pledged to make government more open and accountable to its citizens," President Obama proclaimed in a taped announcement, and this new tool will provide Americans with "a direct line" to the White House for issues they are concerned about. Critics say the timing of the new project is not coincidental, as it comes at a time when the President and congressional Democrats are eagerly discussing how the federal government can promote job growth — through legislative action.

WhiteHouse.gov has the [details](#) on how the petitions will work:

Individuals will be able to create or sign a petition that calls for action by the federal government on a range of issues. If a petition gathers enough support (i.e., signatures) it will be reviewed by a standing group of White House staff, routed to any other appropriate offices and generate an official, on-the-record response.

How many signatures? Initially petitions that gather more than 5,000 signatures in 30 days will be reviewed and answered.

There's another aspect to this meant to emphasize the grassroots, word of mouth organizing that thrives on the internet. At first, a petition's unique URL will only be known to its creator and will not show up anywhere else on WhiteHouse.gov. It's up to that person to share it in their network to gather an initial amount of signatures — initially 150 — before it is searchable on WhiteHouse.gov.

In hawking the Obama administration's new "grassroots" medium for "transparency," Senior Adviser David Plouffe [wrote](#) an e-mail to White House website users telling them that "We the People" is "about to change the way Americans engage with President Obama and his Administration." Plouffe notes that "the idea is actually written into our founding documents," because "throughout history, Americans have used petitions to organize around issues they care about."



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NBC's Chuck Todd threw a curveball to White House communications director Dan Pfeiffer, [asking](#) him if the administration would earnestly discuss abolishing the Environmental Protection Agency if the idea amassed 5,000 supporters. Pfeiffer responded, "If there are ideas that are ones that we fundamentally disagree with or are bad ideas and enough people come forward, we'll respond to why we disagree with that idea and look for a way to work together on other ideas." In other words, not likely.

Allen St. Pierre, executive director of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, told *Politico* in an interview that he would submit a petition that would easily garner "5,000 signatures in less than one hour."

Republicans and conservative organizations are highly suspicious of the administration's new move. "It's just more people that they can communicate with," said Patrick Ruffini, a partner at the conservative digital media company Engage. "The Obama campaign and the Obama White House are extremely metrics-driven in their online operation.... One thing we know works from an online perspective is petitions ... particularly petitions that have a shot at getting in front of the president." It's another way for the White House to retrieve contact information from voters, and it's a government marketing scheme that equates to "you may win an iPad," Ruffini added.

"The president is clearly in campaign mode from his fundraisers to his campaign bus tour and now more campaign tactics coming out from the official White House," [asserted](#) Republican National Committee spokeswoman Kirsten Kukowski. "This shouldn't come as any surprise to Americans who have come to see him as the ultimate campaigner-in-chief." Some critics have gone so far as to claim the webpage is illegal, as it could be construed as using taxpayer-funded government resources for campaigning purposes.

First it's a Midwest bus tour, then a "special dinner" with the President, and now an online petition campaign. If there's one thing you can give the White House, they sure know how to market their products. And to think, the Department of Marketing hasn't even been created yet.



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