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2021 Professional Practices Program

Texting and Voting A Collaborative Time Saving Experience Lee County, NC

Submitted by:

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BACKGROUND

In my time as an election's administrator, I have worked in two North Carolina counties – Gaston and Lee, and now the North Carolina State Board of Elections. Through the three different jobs, one thing on Election Day has stayed the same: the phone calls. Elections administrators are faced with the same phone calls that include precinct worker questions, media inquiries, and what time do the polls open and close. Perhaps the most common question received is, "Where do I vote?" Each phone call takes time from the staff. In fact, some offices employ multiple temporary staff members just to answer the calls and the repetitive questions. While working in Lee County as the Director of Elections, a suggestion came from an unexpected place that could save time, make Election Day less stressful, and help the Board of Elections staff better serve the voters.

On Election Day in Lee County in 2019 the members of the Lee County Information Technology Department (IT) were on hand like every other Election Day to help with any technology issues that arose and to serve as rovers. For Public Safety Systems Engineer, Nick Gaster, it was his first time helping on Election Day. The day started off like any other Election Day with precinct worker calls and the numerous questions from voters about what they were voting on today and the most prevalent question of "Where do I vote?" After witnessing the repetitive questions and answers, Mr. Gaster approached me and asked if I had ever heard of a chat bot. I had not and he responded I think it's something that could really help you all.

He proceeded to tell me a chat bot is a tool that would allow voters to use their cell phones to text their election related questions and receive answers in real time. The responses would be automated. After submitting the initial voting-related questions other than possible updated questions, the election departments job would be done. I told Mr. Gaster that it sounded like a wonderful idea that I would love to implement before the 2020 Presidential Primary.

GOAL

The goal of this collaboration was to help voters with a way to ask questions about the voting process at their own convenience and receive responses quickly. A secondary goal was to help reduce the number of repetitive phone calls on Election Day and help elections administrators focus their attention on other matters and thus save time.

HOW IT WORKS

The first step the Lee County Elections staff and I did in developing the chat bot was to form the questions a voter would ask, not the way elections administrators would ask. This was very important since the chat bot can only respond to very specific commands. Instead of asking where is my Election Day precinct, the question needed to be, "Where do I vote?" If by chance the voter texted a question the chat bot did not recognize, the voter would receive a response that stated that the chat bot could not help them with that, but they could call the Lee County Board of Elections Office. The chat bot also gave suggested questions the voter could ask the chat bot and receive answers to.

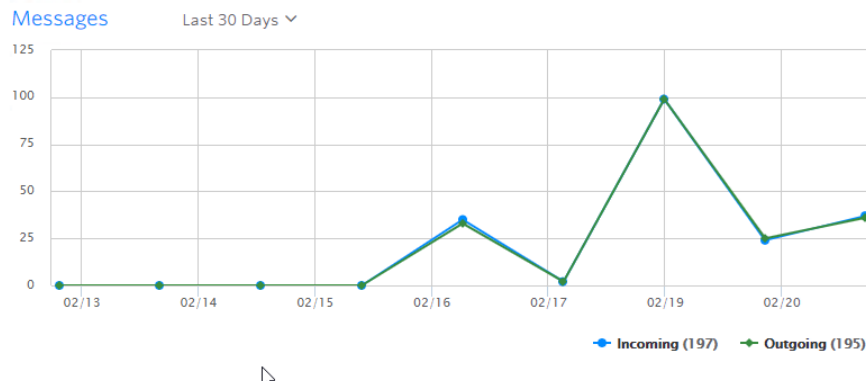
In addition, there was little effort on the IT department's end. Fortunately, there was already an existing program in place to run the chat bot through Amazon LEX and Twillo. Amazon runs the algorithm and it gets stronger and better all the time and Twillo responds to the text messages. There were some difficult parts, including threading the maze of going from Amazon LEX and Twillo for the SMS end of things.

OUTCOME

The Lee County Board of Elections chat bot debuted on February 16, 2020 during the early voting period in North Carolina. The idea was to mainly use it for Election Day. However, the plan was to use the early voting period as a soft demonstration. This proved to be fortuitous as there were questions about voting in the primary and party affiliation that were not anticipated. The Board of Elections staff and the IT staff were able to change this and have

the bot answer the questions successfully. Additionally, during the early voting period we had inclement weather. The IT staff was able to update the chat bot to respond to questions about the weather and if voting was taking place as scheduled or was delayed. Below is a chart that demonstrated the chat bot's effectiveness during the 2020 Primary Election.

38	Misses
392	Q&A
196	Answers
19	miss rate %
81	Hit Rate %



As demonstrated by the chart there were 392 potential less phone calls that were answered by the Board of Elections during this time thanks to the chat bot. To give perspective, the Lee County Board of Elections staff consists of 4 staff members and 36,264 registered voters in March of 2020. Voters found the new tool helpful, too. In one instance on Election Day an elderly voter who did not own a cell phone came up to one of the closed early voting locations. They saw it was closed and another voter who had a phone read the sign on the door and used chat bot to look up where she should go to vote along with finding out for himself where to vote.

FUTURE

The future of the chat bot seems to be very bright. Since the 2020 Presidential Primary changes have already been made. Originally the questions could only be asked and answered in English. For the 2020 Presidential Election answers could be asked and answered in Spanish. Additionally, the question and answer for voting by mail was expanded to include more detail as a result of the heightened interest in this method.

For each type of election (municipal, primary, general) questions will need to be updated. The chat bot will be extremely helpful in answering questions about photo identification requirements in North Carolina. Currently voters do not have to show identification except under certain circumstances. Pending litigation could change this. A question and answer could be added to the chat bot about what type of photo identification is needed to vote. This would continue to alleviate phone calls on Election Day and help the voters access the information they needed quickly and at their own convenience. Finally, the chat bot is also very cost effective. Each message cost .0075 of a dollar and would have a minimum budget impact. In fact, for both elections held during 2020 the chat bot only cost 5 dollars to operate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Just like the process of implanting the chat bot, this paper was a collaboration. A special thanks to the current Director of the Lee County Board of Elections Jeni Harris, for helping me gather information that was needed for the paper and to Nick Gaster, for working on Election Day and for giving us a new tool to help the voters of Lee County. Thanks to Adam Ragan and Mary Jane Garver of the Gaston County Board of Elections and to Karen Brinson Bell for all their help proofreading the paper.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment One-Chat Bot Questions and Answers

Where do I vote

You must vote at your assigned polling location on Election Day, Nov 3rd. To find your polling location, Go to vt.ncsbe.gov/RegLkup or call us at [919-718-4646](tel:919-718-4646). Interested in voting early in person? Then ask me about early voting!

donde voto

Debe votar en su lugar de votación asignado el día de las elecciones, el 3 de noviembre. Para encontrar su centro de votación, visite vt.ncsbe.gov/RegLkup o llámenos al [919-718-4646](tel:919-718-4646). Interesado en votar temprano en persona ¡Entonces pregúntame sobre la votación adelantada!

Can I vote by mail

NC offers every voter the ability to request and vote an absentee ballot by mail. Request forms are available at www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-mail or at the Election's office. Mailed ballots will require the voter's signature on the return envelope AND information and signature of one witness. Return envelopes can be turned in at the Election's office, at One-Stop sites, or via mail by the voter or voter's near relatives/legal guardian. In-person voting

Are elections fun

Sorry I don't have that answer, but I will look into it and may be able to answer it tomorrow. You can call the Board of Elections at [919-718-4646](tel:919-718-4646) or visit them at 225 S. Steele Str. You can try asking me about early voting, absentee by mail, ballots, or election day to see if I can answer a different question for you.

Attachment Two-Social Media Posts



Lee County Board of Elections

Feb 19, 2020 · ⚙

Have election related questions? You can now text them to us! Text 919-299-2159 to learn more!

#leencvotes



Lee County Board of Elections

Mar 3, 2020 · ⚙

Come out and vote! If you need to know where to vote text us at 919-299-2159, call us at 919-718-4646, or visit the website at: <https://vt.ncsbe.gov/PPLkup/>. You can come see us on 225 S. Steele Street and someone will be happy to help you!



Parker Holland

Security and Support Technician at N.C. State Board of Elections.

1yr · Edited · ⚙

We are always trying to make the voting process more accessible for voters. Thanks to [Kyle W. Edwards](#), [CGCIO](#) Nick Gaster, and the amazing team at the Lee County Information Technology Department, Lee County voters can now text their election related questions to 919-299-2159 and receive answers in real time. Thanks to [VaTonya Gardner](#) and all of the Lee County Elections team members for helping make this possible. Remember, early voting ends tomorrow at 3:00 PM!

11

608 views



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Comment



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608 views of your post



leecountync



13 likes

leecountync Your vote matters! Today is the day to vote in the 2020 Primary Election! Polls in Lee County are open until 7:30 PM. Not sure where your voting precinct is? Text "where do I vote?" to 919-299-2159 or follow the link - vt.ncsbe.gov/PPLkup/ If you still have questions, you may contact the Lee County Board of Elections at (919) 718-4646.

#leecountync #leecountyncvotes #yourvotematters #everyvotecounts #2020primaryelection

View 1 comment


March 3, 2020

Attachment Three-Newspaper Article- https://www.sanfordherald.com/news/more-than-800-ballots-cast-in-first-week-of-early-voting/article_e9414929-6c8c-5b50-b195-155047ac7a17.html

more than 800 ballots cast in first week of early voting






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More than 800 ballots cast in first week of early voting

By NANCY MCCLEARY NMCCLEARY@SANFORDHERALD.COM Feb 21, 2020



There is only one week left to cast a ballot in One Stop Early Voting for the 2020 primary elections.


Since the early voting period kicked off Feb. 13, 811 people have voted in Lee County, said Parker Holland, director of the Lee County Board of Elections.

In 2016, a total of 4,404 people took advantage of early voting, he said.

New this year, the Lee County Board of Elections, with the help of the county's IT department, has set up a text line that can be used by residents to ask questions about voting or elections in real time.

"We're really excited," Holland said.

The text line is monitored by the IT department, Holland said, and is designed to answer questions such as "Am I registered?" "What day is Election Day?" or "Where do I vote?"



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