2009 Professional Practices Program

Reducing Lost Voters through Electronic Polling Place Lookup

Johnson County, Kansas

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Reducing Lost Voters through Electronic Polling Place Lookup – A Best Practice

Staff members at the Johnson County Election Office always braced themselves on Presidential election days, knowing the phones would ring constantly, all day long. In November 2000, colleagues from other county departments sent e-mails because they could not get through on the phones. In 2004 we rented cell phones as emergency numbers. Despite postcards to every voter, street guides at the polls, and special training for election workers, the problem remained.

Most calls were related to “lost voters” who showed up at the wrong polling place. Many were unable or unwilling to go to their correct polling place, and voted a provisional ballot. In November 2004, the Election Office processed 11,301 provisional ballots, of which 4,267 were from the wrong polling place. The office phone system was overwhelmed.

The phone situation was only the most visible “lost voter” impact.

- It is a negative experience for the voter, who is faced with three choices: (1) driving to yet another voting location, (2) casting a provisional ballot on which some contests cannot be counted, or (3) not voting in the election.
- At the polls, the election worker who is helping a lost voter is not available to assist other voters
- In Kansas, every provisional ballot is examined individually. Typically, staff members start researching Election Day provisionals on Wednesday morning following the election, and work through the weekend to be ready for Canvass on the following Monday.

Reducing the number of “lost voters” was a primary concern as we planned for the 2008 elections. Population growth, relocation, and facility changes meant that 2 out of 3 Johnson County voters would have a new polling location. With the approval of the Board of County Commissioners and support from a local marketing and business development firm, Election Office staff members devised and implemented a year-long public education campaign known as JoCoPoLo (Johnson County Polls Locator).

The JoCoPoLo campaign had three goals – (1) increase voter participation, (2) promote advance voting, and (3) remind voters to check their polling place location before going to vote on Election Day. The jocopolo.com website undergirded the campaign.

- To increase voter participation, we saturated the county with election information. The theme character from the website appeared on a brightly-painted repurposed surplus ambulance which student ambassadors drove to public events. Public service announcements featured the character and the catchy jingle. We sent every voter an oversize postcard with their specific election information.
- At the website voters could print out an application for advance voting by mail or look up information on the four In-person Advance sites where they could vote on a machine. When a voter checks in, an access card is encoded to activate the ballot for the voter’s address, allowing any voter to vote at any Early Voting site in the county.
- The office developed two electronic tools for checking polling place locations, which became a hit with voters.
  o On the campaign website – jocopolo.com – entering an address returns the polling place and a map with turn-by- turn directions.
  o From a cell phone, a revolutionary, first-of-its-kind text messaging service enables mobile users to text VOTEKS and the address to short code 74574. Within 60 seconds a return message gives their polling place name and address.
  o The services retrieve information from the same database, which is updated before every election.
  o Both tools allow a voter who has moved to look up the polling place for their new address, and complement the official Election Office website, jocoelection.org, where a voter can look up their polling place and sample ballot. The site shows the voter’s current registration address.

The final segment of the campaign was the Election Day Hot Line – in which volunteers from other County departments assisted the Election Office by answering a dedicated phone line set up exclusively for “lost voter” calls from election workers at the polls.
The jocopolo.com website was the key to the “Hot Line” on Election Day. Since only election workers had the hot line phone number, calls were specific and instructions were straightforward. “. . . go to http://my.jocopolo.com, type in the address provided by the election worker, hit the return key, and read back the polling place name and address.”

In a wonderful demonstration of “intra-governmental” cooperation, county departments rallied to help:

- Emergency Management & Homeland Security provided the operations center to receive phone calls
- Information Technology set up a dedicated phone number to receive up to six calls simultaneously and queue additional calls, and installed six phones for the call center.
- More than 45 volunteers from 12 county departments signed up for two-hour shifts to answer calls from election workers related to “lost voters” – so many that we had a stand-by list as well.
- Departments brought food and water for an impromptu pot luck feast for the volunteers, who also received a “Democracy Posse” tee-shirt from the Election Office.
- The Johnson County Library, which had created an extensive Election 2008 web presence including links to the Election Office sites, sent employees to training so they could answer “lost voter” calls that might come to the Library.

With “lost voter” calls handled capably by other county employees at the administration building, staff members at the Election Office were able to respond to other questions from the polls, handle media requests, and perform all the other tasks that make up a Presidential election day.

Campaign results:

(1) **Increased voter participation** – the county set records in both **voter registration** – 363,896, and **ballots cast** – 285,001;

(2) **Increased advance voting** – the percentage of advance votes rose from 37.8% in 2004 to 49.28% in 2008;

(3) **Decreased “lost voters”** – of this record turnout of voters – less than one-half of one percent (668 total) cast a provisional ballot at the wrong polling location, dropping from 4,267 in 2004. That's a decrease of nearly 85 percent! Overall, provisional ballots decreased from 11,301 in 2004 to 8,198 in 2008. In 2004 “Lost Voter” calls swamped the Election Office phone system, but in 2008 the “Hot Line,” which was prepared for hundreds of calls an hour, received fewer than 700 calls on Election Day.

**Best Practice**

Electronic polling place lookup proved its worth as a Best Practice during the JoCoPoLo campaign, and we are continuing it for all elections. The numbers above tell the story.

In feedback voters praised both the online lookup at jocopolo.com and the VOTEKS cell phone application.

Likewise, we have added the Election Day Hot Line to our Presidential Elections Best Practices list.

**Supporting Documents Attached:**

- JoCoPoLo.com website with results of polling place lookup
- VOTEKS Wireless (Cell Phone) Application
- Lost Voter Hot Line Instructions
JoCoPoLo.com website with results of polling place lookup

FIND YOUR ASSIGNED ELECTION DAY POLLING LOCATION

Polling place for 2931 E KANSAS CITY RD, 66061
Located in Olathe, Kansas - Ward 4 Precinct 3
Washington School
1202 N Ridgewood Rd
Olathe

Map data ©2006 TeleAtlas

1. Head southwest on 0.7 mi Kansas City Rd toward E 123rd Terrace
2. Turn right at 0.4 mi Harrod St
3. Turn right at N Ridgewood Rd Destination will be on the right

1.2 mi (about 3 mins)
VOTEKS Wireless (Cell Phone) Application

Voter texts VOTEKS, address and zip to short code 74574

Text message goes to Johnson County database for lookup of voting location. Address data is processed, a polling place lookup is performed, and a return message is sent back to the voter.

Results are returned to the cell phone within 60 seconds

The person submitting a text request will be able to determine a voting location for any address, without regard to where he lives. There are no apparent privacy issues in this, as there are several other ways that the caller could learn the voting location for a given address.

To develop and host the VOTEKS application, the Election Office worked with TextCaster, a local small business that has become a leading provider of wireless text messaging systems serving clients in media, education, public safety and banking throughout the United States.

This is believed to have been the first interactive short-code messaging application used for any government function (not just elections) in the country.
Lost Voter Hot Line Instructions – November 4, 2008

Polling Place Lookup

1. Election workers will call 913-715-1650. The workers will provide a voter’s address.
2. Go to http://my.jocopolo.com
3. Type in the address and hit enter or go:
4. Polling place info comes back:
5. Read only the polling place name and address, not the directions.

6. If the address entered doesn’t exist or included an error, you will get this message:
   “I'm sorry; the address entered cannot be validated. Please retry or visit
   https://voter.jocoelection.org.”
   DO NOT go to that site. Instead, attempt to verify/correct the address and hit Go again.

7. If the address still does not return a polling place, tell the election worker you are not able to obtain a polling location.

Note: If the site is down (very unlikely), tell the election worker the site is down. DO NOT go to http://voter.jocoelection.org. The data there is based on the voter’s registration and the voter may have moved since then.

There is a back-up site, https://myvoteinfo.voteks.org/

However, do not begin using this site without confirmation first from your Election Office contact at 715-6809. The Election Office will check back with you when the JoCoPoLo site is operational again.