2011 Professional Practices Program

Tweeting the Vote:
Engaging the Media and Community Leaders 140 Characters at a Time

Washington, DC

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During the ten months prior to the September 2010 primary election, the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics implemented an ambitious list of innovations including early voting at satellite voting locations, no-excuse absentee voting by mail, same-day voter registration by provisional ballot, new voting equipment, electronic pollbooks and a variety of other changes to the polling place environment.

The new leadership of the Board was faced not only with implementing these changes, but with getting the word out about them. The Board used traditional forms of outreach, such as distributing a Voter Guide to each household and conducting more than 100 outreach events during the months prior to the election, but also worked aggressively to get the word out to voters through opinion leaders, the news media and political campaigns. The Board found one tool, in particular, to be very helpful in communicating with these intermediaries – Twitter.

The D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics launched a Twitter feed as an experiment. Unlike other jurisdictions that have experimented with a broad range of new media, however, the Board focused almost exclusively on Twitter. The idea was to concentrate a small amount of time and maintenance on a single investment – the same effort that it would take to send a text message to a single attentive and tech-savvy reporter whenever there was news to share – to broadcast the latest news in a public forum to any news reporter, political operative or engaged citizen who was interested. Over three elections within less than a year, the Board has gained nearly 950 subscribers to its Twitter feed – far more than ever subscribed to its e-mail news release list.

The Board has also found its Twitter feed to be increasingly valuable for communicating directly with voters, but that is not the primary purpose of the Twitter feed. Twitter is not a substitute for direct mail or for mainstream media coverage of the election. It has, however, proved to be a very effective supplement to press releases, press conferences and working the phones to respond and get the word out to voters to intermediaries - the news media, political organizations and candidates – especially on Election Day.

By adopting a Twitter feed, the Board met opinion leaders where they were already communicating with each other and helped contribute to building an online community that shares information in real time, making the Board’s Twitter feed effectively a 24/7 virtual press conference where media and campaigns can ask their questions, receive a timely response, monitor announcements and communicate with each other. Major media and blogs pick up breaking news from the Board’s Twitter feed. Using mobile technology to post and read information allows Board staff to be extremely responsive even while spread thin during preparations for the election and on Election Day. Rather than having to return to the office to write and distribute an e-mail press release, the Board can issue a statement, respond to a rumor, or broadly distribute an update on developments at a polling place as easily as sending a text message.
The Board began experimenting with social media by simply sending the headline and link to news releases as they were uploaded to the Board’s web site as a convenience to reporters and activists who are increasingly accustomed to monitoring Twitter.

As the calendar for the election year progressed, the Board experimented with using its Twitter feed to “livetweet” occurrences such as candidate petition pickups and filings. This type of public information that does not merit a press release of its own, but does prompt telephone inquiries, has become a staple of the Board’s Twitter feed and draws an enthusiastic following. Rather than responding to e-mail and voice mail messages all day on filing deadlines, the Board’s PIO has found it much more efficient to simply keep a running update and direct the media and campaigns to it.

The Board also began using its Twitter feed to issue regular, bite-size trivia updates about provisions of the Omnibus Election Reform Act that led to press coverage and discussions of the changes in voting laws in the District. The Board has found the tool to be useful at various times throughout the election calendar and gained national press for listing wait times at early voting locations on its web site and posting them to Twitter.

The Board has increasingly used its Twitter feed as a rapid-response tool. When difficulties erupted on the morning of a September primary election, with scattered reports of pollworkers having difficulty opening their polling places on time, the Board found itself in a reactive posture, answering phones as they were ringing off the hook. Over the course of the day, the Board increasingly turned to Twitter for reports of rumors but did not engage directly in the conversation as it did in subsequent elections.

In November, the Board was able to take a much more proactive approach and engage directly in the public dialogue on Twitter about reports of incidents in the field. Armed with a laptop and a radio for direct communication with roving troubleshooters in the field, the Board’s PIO was able to field complaints on Twitter, often before they had been taken elsewhere, engage in the conversation as it was happening, and proactively reach voters raising each complaint, as well as reporters and candidates monitoring the dialogue, in real time rather than responding to rumors after the fact.

For the April special election, the Board steered the dialogue directly, issuing an official “hash tag” – a code used with each tweet to allow for easier searching – and working closely with a blogger who launched a web site on the election using the same name (four26dc). The Board moved its media center into the same room as the help desk, to allow better coordination, and enlisted the assistance of another agency PIO who also uses Twitter to monitor and respond even when the Board’s PIO was following up on inquiries or speaking with the media. The Board found this to be extremely effective and received very positive press coverage for its responsiveness on Election Day.

Twitter – like any new communications tool – can be daunting. The experience in D.C., however, suggests that other election officials may find it worthwhile to experiment with, particularly if news reporters and political campaigns within the jurisdiction are already using it to communicate with each other on Election Day.
Excerpts from the D.C. Board of Elections and Ethics Twitter Feed
April 26, 2011 Special Election

May 11, 2011

Thank you to the 924 voters who worked for the Board on #four26dc! Your stipend checks of $120-180 are issued and in the mail.

May 10, 2011

Our follower count has grown by 27% in the last month. Not that we're counting. Thanks for the retweets, especially from @DDOTDC! #four26dc

and #four26dc is a wrap. Welcome new followers! Watch this space for after-action analysis, off-year improvements and prep for #DCision12

The Board has voted to certify the results of the April 26 special election. #four26dc

We spent our day discerning voter intent. Results of a hand count of ballots in one precinct per Ward: http://bit.ly/k1k9O1 #four26dc

May 9, 2011

We are now conducting our post-election manual audit of the #four26dc special election: http://yfrog.com/h2oycgdi

May 7, 2011

Final unofficial, pre-certification results for the April 26 special election (turnout up to 10.3%): http://bit.ly/hJvrUj #four26dc

Final count of absentee and provisional ballots (yes that is a dot matrix printer): http://yfrog.com/hs7xniyj #weusezipdiskstoo
May 6, 2011

Random draw of precincts for #four26dc post-election audit: 36 (W1), 17 (W2), 12 (W3), 55 (W4), 139 (W5), 82 (W6), 108 (W7), 116 (W8).

Post-election audit of ballots from one precinct per Ward for #four26dc will begin on Monday at 9am in Room 1117 of One Judiciary Square.

Final unofficial results of #four26dc, incl absentee, provisional and curbside ballots, will be posted after last mail run today.

May 4, 2011

Cast a special ballot on April 26? Confirm that your ballot will be counted:

http://bit.ly/kf4h65 #four26dc

May 1, 2011

mattrumsey @ggwash Keep the ideas coming!

April 29, 2011

Did you miss this earlier? Archive at http://tinyurl.com/3seesxj RT @DiscussDC: @VincentOrangeDC and @DCBOEE Dir Rokey Suleman #four26dc

Yes. Can break down http://bit.ly/k3Zvkx w/more detail next week RT @REtroCYCLED: does/will @dcboee release day-of registration numbers?

URL for online Voter Guide was on card but not everybody has Internet access. RT @MattRumsey woman saw notice, didn’t know how to find info.

Date request logged/mailed public record at http://bit.ly/iZtvHO & can check date signed on req RT @johnnowicki: friend didn’t get absentee.

By Tues we’ll have number out-of-precinct, number reg. Thx for heads up RT @jacksantucci could not find many who claimed to have registered.

April 28, 2011

Our target date to certify the results of the April 26 special election is Tuesday, May 10. #four26dc

RT @DCCourtsInfo: D.C. Courts have been on Twitter since 2009! A great way to reach out to community, answer questions, provide info.

Now checking registration status of 1,894 provisional and curbside voters. All ballots will not qualify to be counted on May 6. #four26dc

DC voters cast 1627 provisional and 267 curbside ballots on #four26dc. Data by precinct:

April 26, 2011

Thank you! RT @adamdwayman: Real winner of today's election is @DCBOEE. Well done on all fronts - especially the tweeting. #four26dc

Our help desk is taking calls from pollworkers with questions about closing down the voting equipment: http://yfrog.com/h4gpk9ogi.

Following closing procedures for voting machines used at the Board's office for in-person voting: http://yfrog.com/h45s1fkj #four26dc

The polls are closed on #four26dc! First results at www.dcboee.us by 9:30 pm. More info at www.dcboee.us/guidereporting426.htm.

@DCStudentsSpeak @GtownVoice If they cast a provisional ballot we have ten days to resolve the registration question #four26dc

Glad to hear it! RT @AdamCHealy Was voter number 278 at Sherwood Rec Center. Smooth sailing with no line and super friendly poll workers.

Can you alert the precinct captain? Fastest way to resolve RT @gymerk: @DCBOEE electioneering inside the signs is at Precinct 87 #four26dc

RT @katiebreslin: I got retweeted by @DCBOEE. #winning

Done. Students: go back, vote, bring ID to DCBOEE w/in week RT @GtownVoice Students denied special ballot. DCBOEE following up bit.ly/eSx8Au

The "Pollworker 2.0" label is so going to stick RT @tbridge Indispensable Captain's tool: iPad. Twitter, maps, access to DCBOEE.us.

Small server room actually. Big room was to download data from electronic pollbooks (not using for #four26dc). // So, will @dcboee vote counting involve the big room with 75 laptops technique or something less painful?

@whiteknuckled Vote where you live now. Go to new new polling place, cast a special ballot (category 'election day change of address').
Quickest way to resolve electioneering issues = ask for the precinct captain RT @retrocycled campaigners behind the 'no electioneering' sign.

Turns out precinct 3 got their pollbooks first in the swap this AM; precinct 11 got theirs later. Rep who delivered says by 8:00.
Pollen books were swapped this morning at precincts 3 and 11, first voters this AM cast special ballots. Problem resolved. #four26dc

:-{ RT @meghangordon: There's sneezing in the voting booths, thanks to mowers descending on Haynes charter school on #four26dc.

RT @dcist_martin: It's not Friday, but it's #ff if only for @DCBOEE. Very useful and informative. Follow now! #four26dc

OK thanks for the tip. Will pass along to our dispatcher. // RT @pauldiegocraney: @DCBOEE the sign at Prec13 at the Episcopal church that says to vote at Goodwill Baptist Church is blowing off. We need more tape/supplies.

Mail ballots, provisional ballots and curbside ballots will not be counted for 10 days. These could be ~10% of the ballots cast. #four26dc.

The first results from the polls will be released between 9:30 pm and 10:00 pm. #four26dc

@codykrice If you are already registered and have voted before you don't have to show ID to vote.

Hate to break it to you but... lower turnout does not mean faster results. What to expect tonight: http://bit.ly/iIPKT8 #four26dc

RT @MattRumsey: 288 voters at HD Cooke Elementary as of 4 pm. #four26dc

Shepherd Elem captain apologizes for late opening. Experncd captain not used to having problems, was focused on maintaining order. #four26dc

Visited Shepherd Elem (Precinct 62, opened 15 min late). Captain could not find checklist to open polls this AM. #four26dc

Getting an early start briefing the roving Area Representatives who assist precinct teams: http://yfrog.com/gzw7gbw

Not sure where to vote? Find your polling place here: http://bit.ly/axu5ZT #four26DC

Polls open at 7! Tweet your voting experience in DC today using the official hash tag #four26dc
Media/observers, need an excuse to stop by our operations center today? We have coffee... http://yfrog.com/h07z8tmj #four26dc

April 24, 2011

Steady stream of voters today; 46 in the first hour. We're open until 5:30! #four26dc

Precinct supply trucks lined up and ready for police escort (they will be guarded overnight): http://yfrog.com/gy5z8kybj

Checking to make sure that everything has been loaded onto the trucks:
http://yfrog.com/h44hqmspj

Voting equipment lined up for loading onto the trucks: http://yfrog.com/h6p32mjj and belted into place: http://yfrog.com/h0btgptj

Busy morning loading the trucks for delivery to polling places for #four26dc:
http://yfrog.com/hs9mamyj