

IBM Watson Assistant Can Help States Deliver Critical Voting Information to Citizens

Idaho Secretary of State's Office has adopted IBM Watson Assistant to help nearly 1 million voters ahead of 2020 general elections

ARMONK, N.Y., Sept. 17, 2020 /PRNewswire/ -- With COVID-19 causing uncertainty about voting logistics and procedures across the country, IBM (NYSE: [IBM](#)) has technology to help states use the AI capabilities of Watson to put this critical data and information directly into the hands of voters.

With states facing a deluge of information requests related to voting procedures, citizens may face wait times to receive answers to their most frequently asked questions.

To help ease this burden and address citizens' voting-related inquiries online or by phone, IBM is offering Watson Assistant on the IBM public cloud to U.S. states at no charge for 60 days. As part of this offering, IBM will assist with initial set up, which typically can be done in a few days. The offering uses advanced Natural Language Processing (NLP) built by IBM Research and available in [IBM Watson Assistant](#) for citizen-facing virtual agents, and [Watson Discovery](#) for text analytics that, when combined, quickly respond to voter questions and requests about the election process. The tool can advise citizens on everything from finding polling places and voting hours to procedures and deadlines for requesting mail-in ballots, and more.

Language is a unique challenge for businesses because it is always evolving and lives in many different forms. Organizations need AI that can understand the language of their business. NLP can parse language into its elemental pieces to help organizations unearth insights, make more informed decisions, and create conversational experiences.

"Early in the pandemic, we mobilized Watson and its natural language processing technology to help organizations quickly deliver critical information and services to citizens, customers, and employees," said Daniel Hernandez, General Manager, Data and AI, IBM. "With success there and the upcoming U.S. election, we are now mobilizing Watson to manage the flood of information requests and questions from citizens regarding voting logistics and resources."

In March, the state of Idaho determined that there would be no in-person voting for its May primary election due to COVID-19. The [Idaho Secretary of State's Office](#) turned to IBM Watson Assistant to help communicate to its 900,000 registered voters how to cast their ballots by mail through the existing absentee voting system. Heading into the U.S. Presidential election in November, Idaho will continue to use Watson Assistant to field voter queries.

"In short turn, our office needed to communicate the registration and absentee ballot procedures to Idaho voters, and we were bracing ourselves for a wave of calls," said Idaho Chief Deputy Secretary of State Chad Houck. "In just two weeks, two of our people got started with Watson Assistant and trained it to provide important information about how and when to vote. We're now exploring its capabilities throughout the remainder of this election season and beyond to help convey information about the other services and functions we provide for the people of Idaho."

The Watson Assistant offering uses Watson Discovery to find and surface currently available data about voting processes and logistics from external sources, including federal, state and county websites and local sources such as news reports and documents on websites. The offer includes access to more than 25 pre-trained "intents" or queries specific to voting and election logistics. "Intents" are purposes or goals that are expressed in a citizen's input, such as answering a question. By recognizing the intent expressed in a citizen's input, Watson Assistant can choose the correct dialog flow for responding to it. The system is focused specifically on assisting with the act of voting. It does not provide insights or recommendations regarding individual candidates or their positions on specific issues.

Watson Assistant uses advanced NLP capabilities to automate responses to frequently asked questions about voting procedures through the pre-trained intents, that come in via phone call or text, such as "When is my absentee ballot due?", "How do I request an absentee ballot?", "How do I update my voter registration details?" and "When will my polling location be open?".

States can work with IBM to customize Watson Assistant on top of the base model and intents to include tailored information, expanded use cases or add additional questions that are specific to their state or county, as well as integrate with back-end ERP systems.

To date, [IBM Watson Assistant](#) has been [deployed](#) by businesses and government agencies in more than 25 countries around the world to respond to COVID-19 and reimagine the way work will get done in this new operating environment.

Today's news builds on a series of announcements that demonstrate how IBM is advancing Watson's ability to understand the language of business so that companies can generate new insights - from commercializing cutting-edge capabilities from Project Debater to [transforming the fan experience](#) at the US Open to bringing more diverse voices into the public square with '[That's Debatable](#)'.





IBM is helping businesses and consumers take action in [six key areas](#) to emerge smarter, more resilient and more agile for years to come.

For more information about how businesses in any industry can use Watson Assistant, visit: <https://www.ibm.com/watson/covid-response>.

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