Computer Instruments

# Built for Peak Demand

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WHITE PAPER · OCTOBER 2026

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What happens to a government office in the weeks before an election, and what a self-service line does about it

*By Computer Instruments · Published October 30, 2026 · 6 minute read*

## Executive Summary

Before every election, the same three questions arrive at county and city offices in a volume far beyond the capacity of a regular office to handle alone.

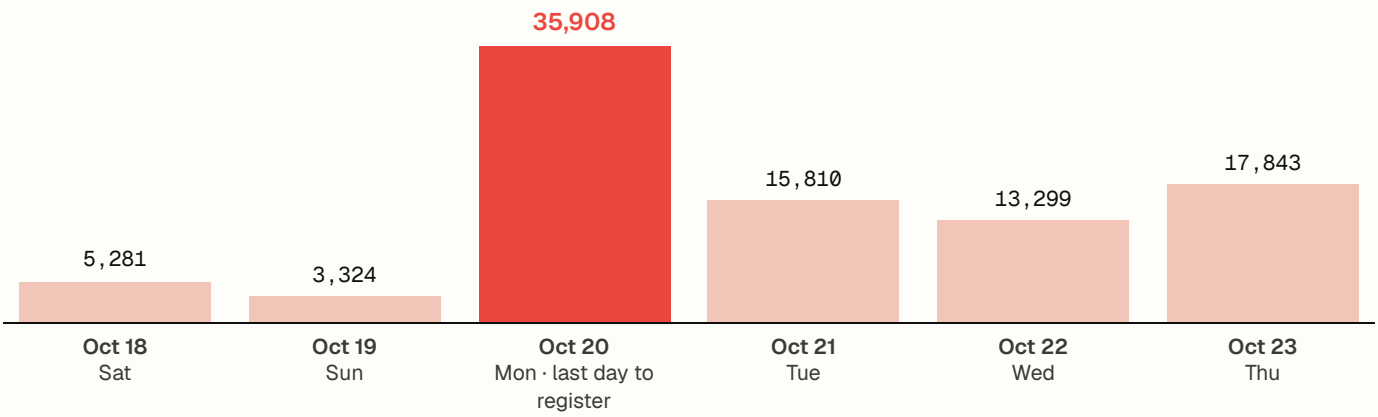
*Am I registered? Where do I vote? How do I get a mail-in ballot?*

None of these are difficult to answer, but that's exactly what makes them expensive. A question with a short, factual answer still occupies a person for several minutes once you count the greeting, the lookup, the clarification, and the goodbye. And it arrives alongside thousands of others in the weeks when the same team is preparing ballots, testing equipment, and meeting statutory deadlines that cannot move.

The volume is hard to picture until you see it. In Los Angeles County, the registrar's office logged 3,324 calls on October 19, 2008, about a normal day for election season. The next day, the last day to register for that November's election, it logged 35,908, more than ten times as many. To keep up, the office added 60 operators and opened two remote phone banks, and it still asked residents to use its website wherever they could.[1]

**Calls to the Los Angeles County registrar, October 18–23, 2008**

Total calls received per day, in the run-up to the November 4, 2008 general election




Source: Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, Status Report 4, October 27, 2008 (source 1).

This is not a problem unique to election season. County and city offices take the same calls over and over: requests for information the office has already published on its website. Most offices don't have the time to count how many of these calls they get each day, but the numbers we do have show that the share is large. San Antonio's 311

department shows that these simple, easy-to-answer calls made up **56% of its total call volume**.[2] Elections follow the same pattern: predictable seasonal demand, arriving faster than any staffing plan can absorb, made up largely of questions with short, factual answers.

> **56%** of all calls to San Antonio's 311 department were simple, easy-to-answer questions.
> Source: San Antonio Report, August 2026 (source 2).

The result is familiar to anyone who has worked an election season. Hold times stretch. Staff get pulled off deadline work to answer questions they have already answered forty times that morning. And some residents simply hang up. A caller who gives up before reaching anyone has not been served, and the office usually has no way of knowing it happened.

Offices don't have to simply ride out the peak. A self-service phone line can take the routine questions off the staff's plate, and the same line keeps working long after Election Day.

## A Resident's Call, Start to Finish

Picture a resident calling the county's voter information line at nine in the evening. The office closed hours ago. They have just remembered they moved in March, and they are not sure their registration followed them.

The line picks up on the first ring.

Within seconds they have their registration status. On the same call they get the rest of what they needed: their polling place, the street, and the hours it opens and closes, plus how voting by mail works in their county, including how to request a ballot, the deadline, and where it can be returned.

They hang up with every answer they called for.

No member of staff was involved. Nobody was placed on hold. The call came in at an hour when the office has never been open, and it was resolved completely.

## What the Line Is Actually Doing

The important part is not that it answers. It is *where the answers come from*.

The line does not know anything about election law and does not pretend to. It reads back the jurisdiction's own published information: the registration record, the polling place assignment, the mail-ballot process the county has adopted. A resident checking how vote-by-mail works gets their own county's rules, not a general description of how it works somewhere else.

That distinction matters more in elections than almost anywhere. Rules differ state by state, county by county. An automated line that improvised, generalized, or drew on anything other than the office's own data would be worse than no line at all. The line is only as accurate as the records it reads from, and those records stay in the office's hands.

It is also why this is a self-service problem rather than an information problem. The office had already published everything the caller wanted. Election offices know this. In October 2020, the Morris County Clerk's office in New Jersey was averaging more than 100 calls an hour across its election lines, and the clerk publicly asked residents

to “use our website first before calling for routine questions.”[3] But a website only helps the residents who go looking. What the office did not have was a way for someone to reach that information at nine at night, in their preferred language, without a person on the other end.

## What It Changes for the Office

**Routine calls stop consuming staff time.** The registration, polling-place, and mail-ballot questions are the high-volume, low-complexity end of the queue. They are precisely the calls best suited to self-service and worst suited to a person reading from a screen. Handling them automatically means the genuinely complicated calls, the ones that need judgment, reach a human faster. When simple, published-answer calls aren’t separated out, they queue behind the complex ones and drag the whole operation down with them.

**Residents get answers in their own language.** A self-service line answers in every language the office supports, at any hour, without a bilingual staff member on shift. The office adds languages as its population changes rather than hiring for each one. In a county where a meaningful share of residents are more comfortable in a language other than English, a self-service line is often the only channel that serves them at all hours without staffing for it.

**Every caller hears the same correct answer.** Consistency is hard to maintain across a seasonal team working long days under pressure. It is trivial for a line reading from a single source.

**The office stops losing callers it never knew it had.** Abandoned calls are invisible in most offices. A line that always answers turns an unmeasured loss into a served resident.

**Staff stay on the work only they can do.** Ballot processing, chain of custody, compliance, equipment testing. None of it can be deferred, and all of it competes with the phone.

## The Line Doesn’t Retire on Election Day

An election-only system is difficult to justify. It demands a lot of attention for a few weeks of use, and it sits idle for the rest of the cycle. But the peak is not really about elections. It is about a predictable spike in simple, repetitive questions arriving faster than a small team can absorb them, and counties have that problem year-round.

Between elections, the same line becomes the resident front door. Office hours and locations. Trash and recycling pickup days. Permit status. Property tax questions. Utility billing. Benefits eligibility and appointment information. Every one of them is the same shape as *where do I vote*: a factual question with a published answer, asked by a lot of people, at hours when nobody is at a desk. And it works in the other direction, too: a resident who spots a pothole on the drive home can report it that evening, without waiting for the office to open.

**The same kind of question, all year**

What callers ask, and why one line can answer both

| BEFORE AN ELECTION | THE REST OF THE YEAR |
|---|---|
| Am I registered? | What's the status of my permit? |
| Where do I vote? | When is trash day? |
| How do I get a mail-in ballot? | How do I pay my property tax or utility bill? |
| When is the deadline? | I'd like to report a pothole. |

Election season is the reason to build it. Year-round citizen self-service is what you keep.

## Where to Start

If you are considering upgrading your own line, the useful first exercise is not a technology evaluation. It is fifteen minutes with your own call data.

**Fifteen minutes with your own call data**

1. Which three questions do you answer most?
2. What fraction of your call volume do they represent in the weeks before an election?
3. How many of those calls arrive outside your opening hours?
4. How many callers hang up before anyone reaches them?

Most offices find the last question is the one they cannot answer, and that is usually the strongest argument for doing something about it.

## How Computer Instruments Approaches This

Computer Instruments has built self-service voice systems for public sector and enterprise organizations since 1979. One of those systems runs a county elections office's voter information line. It has carried that county through election after election for years, and it is answering calls today. If you'd like to hear how it has worked for them, we can arrange a reference call.

The AI Concierge takes self-service a step further. Callers ask their question in their own words, choose their preferred language at the start of the call, and the line translates in real time.[4] It works on the phone system you already run.

## Sources


1. Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk, "Status Report 4: The November 4, 2008 General Election," memo to the Board of Supervisors, October 27, 2008.
2. San Antonio Report, August 2026, reporting the city's 311 department.
3. Morris County, New Jersey, "Morris County Clerk Urges Voters to Use Website for Voting Questions," county news release, October 14, 2020.
4. Computer Instruments product documentation for the AI Concierge and Global Language Assist: conversational answering on the phone system an office already runs, real-time conversational translation with caller-selected language, and integration with existing communication platforms.