

Utah.Gov

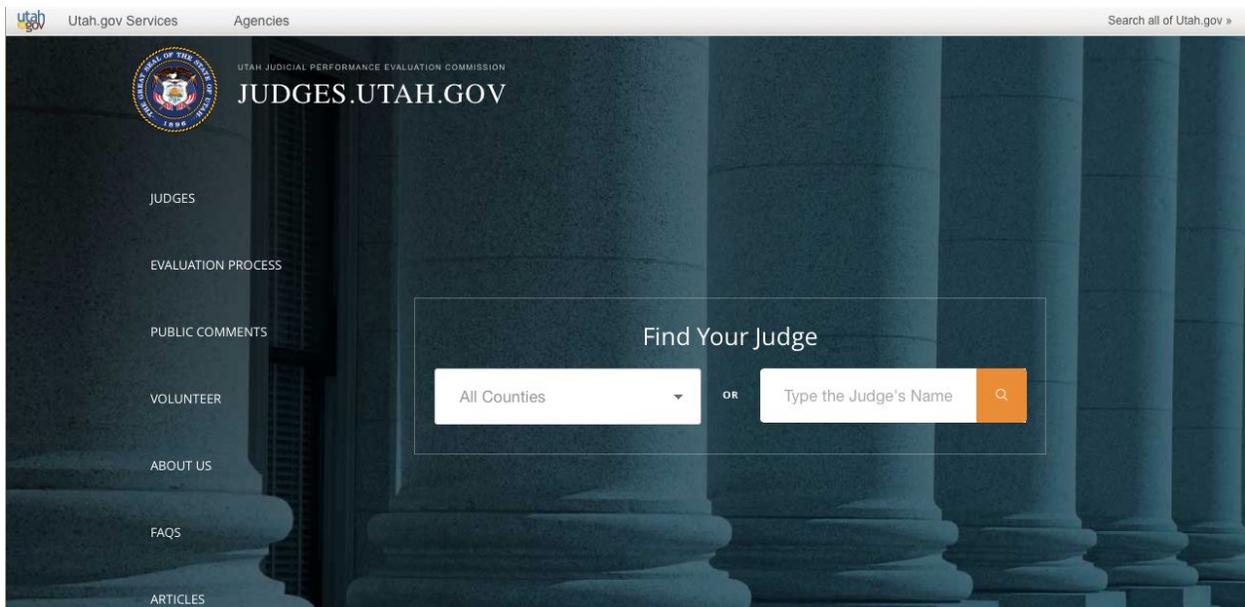
Judicial Review

Category: Government to Citizen

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State of Utah

Project Initiation and Completion Dates:
April 2016 – September 2016

NASCIO 2017



Executive Summary

judges.utah.gov

Launched in 2008

Redesigned and updated in 2016

In Utah, voters have the difficult responsibility to hold the judiciary accountable to the community. Voters are expected to be educated and informed about casting votes for judges, nonpartisan elected officials. Judicial performance evaluations are in place as a way to inform the public of each individual judge's performance. The Utah Judicial Performance Evaluation Commission (JPEC) created a website to provide a venue where citizens can learn more about judges serving in their area.

Previously the website was merely a static site, was not easily searchable, and could overload potential voters with information. The website is now a useful tool for voters that was updated with new features such as: search, the "at-a-glance tool, public comment tool, information about the judicial selection process, tools to locate judges in a resident's jurisdiction.

A key feature of judges.utah.gov is the "at a glance" summary about each Utah judge so voters can assess facts quickly and improve ballot completion.

Residents can view summaries of a judge's:

- Biography
- Evaluations
- Legal ability
- Judicial temperament
- Administrative performance
- Procedural fairness

Residents may also:

- Make public comment
- Search for judges based on county and name

The site benefits voters and empowers them to make informed decisions to retain or not retain judges.

The site provides significant time savings to the residents of Utah by aggregating useful statistics and information for Utah residents.

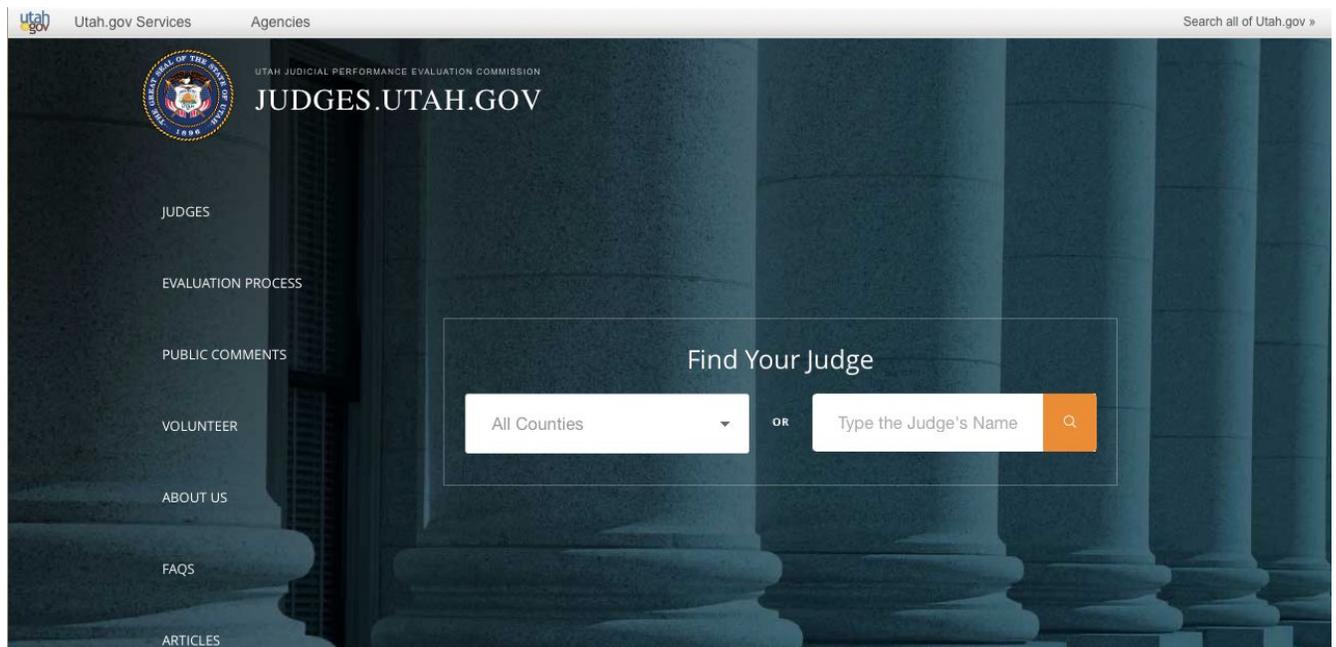
Helping State Residents Select Quality Judges

The Utah Judicial Performance Evaluation Commission (JPEC) created the judges.utah.gov website to provide a venue where citizens can learn more about judges serving in their area. The site's goals include:

- To collect and disseminate valid information about each judge's performance so that voters may make informed decisions about whether or not to retain that judge in office;
- To provide judges with useful feedback about their performance so that they may become better judges and to thereby improve the quality of the judiciary as a whole; and
- To promote public accountability of the judiciary while ensuring that the judiciary continues to operate as an independent branch of government.

The site empowers a knowledgeable voter and allows residents of Utah to confidently retain or not retain judges.

The site was completely redesigned in 2016 adding new tools and search capabilities to improve service for Utah voters.



Concept Problem

Utah State Code requires that state and justice court judges are put on the ballot within three years after the judge was appointed. Additionally, those judges face a retention election every six years, while Supreme Court Justices are voted on every 10 years.

Citizens exercising their right to vote is the bedrock of our country. Ben Franklin stated that:

“A nation of well-informed men who have been taught to know and prize the rights which God has given them cannot be enslaved. It is in the region of ignorance that tyranny begins.”

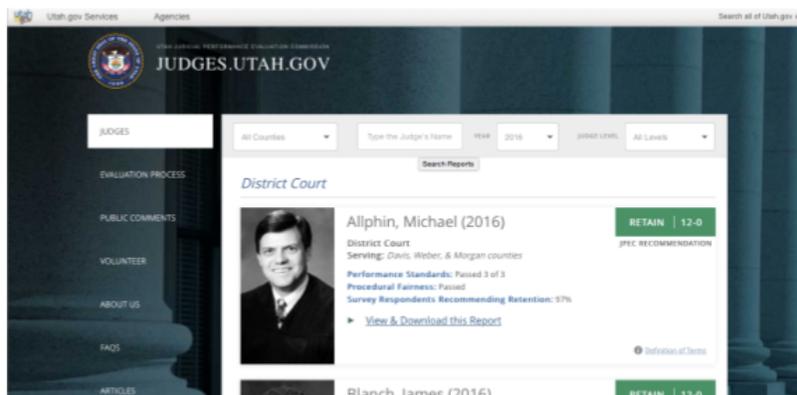
However, the ability to make an informed decision about elected officials is not always an easy task, especially knowing about a Judge’s past performance which are buried in court records.

During these local elections, learning about judges can be difficult, but the JPEC simplifies the process and has provided a leading solution for evaluating quality judges. The previous site presented all of the evaluations from commission in such a complicated manner that the average citizen had difficulty finding the information and if they did, they struggled to understand what the evaluation said.

Many of the citizens viewed the old, non mobile responsive website on their smart phones while at the polling booth and were not able to view the evaluations.

Solution

JPEC’s evaluations, which are summarized at judges.utah.gov, were reorganized, simplified to focus on citizens just learning about judges, and revamped to be mobile responsive. The site now provides concise summaries on legal ability, judicial temperament, procedural fairness, and administrative performance with simple Retain graphics (replacing multipage reports). The site also allows public comment on any judge serving in Utah. Residents can search for judges based on county, name, and court type.



VS.



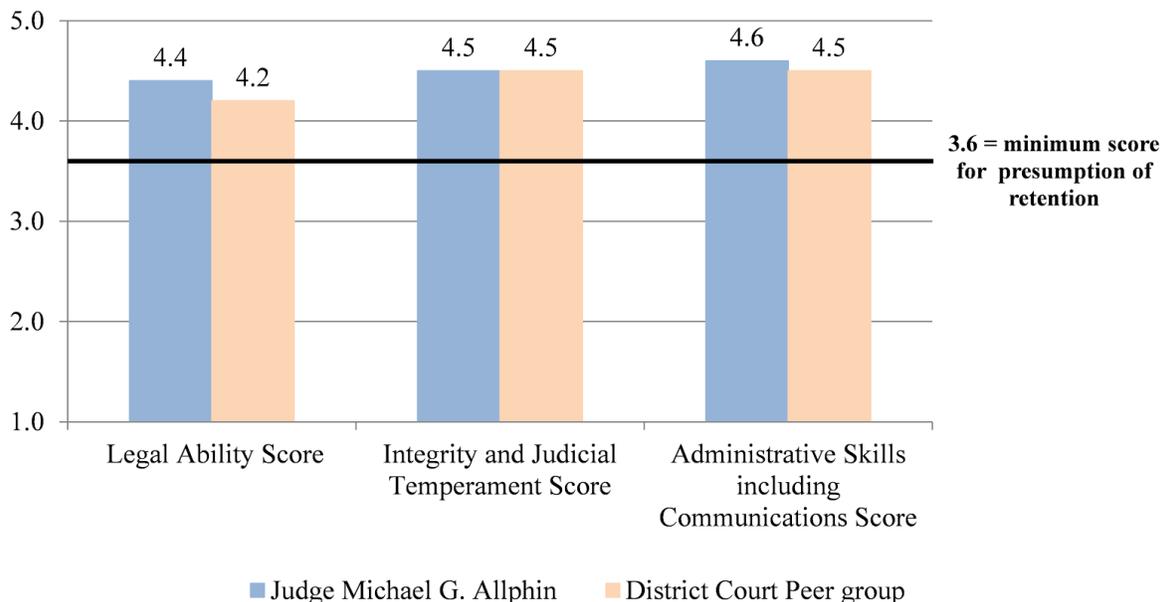
One key feature of judges.utah.gov is the “at a glance” summary about each Utah judge so voters can assess facts quickly. Voter “roll-off” or ballot abandonment for the judiciary elections has been measured around 30%. In many elections, the percentage

of citizens voting for the judiciary hovers at 5%. The “at-a-glance” feature helps address the issue of educating voters. The hope is that this will improve citizen participation.

According to Rebecca Love Kourlis, IAALS Executive Director and former Colorado Supreme Court Justice, when states establish a transparent and thorough Judicial Performance Evaluation program it inspires public trust. She goes on to state, “Also, when states improve and expand their efforts to educate voters about judges’ performance in retention elections, there is a decline in voter roll off and increase in civic engagement.”

The tools added to this site:

- Inspire public trust
- Decrease voter roll-off
- Increase civic engagement



Moreover, voters can review a brief biography on each judge and if the commission has recommended to retain that judge for another term.

In addition, residents can make public comments about experiences with judges. All comments submitted may be classified as public documents upon receipt. Comments are sent to the judge and to JPEC exactly as entered in the comment form.

It's never been easier for Utah voters to access current information on any judge serving throughout the state. We've found voters want relevant information without requiring massive downloads.

Our purpose is to get more information to voters so they can even do a quick glance of judges while in the voting booth, if necessary. Often,

voters are unaware of judges unless they've heard something in the news. We want them to have full access to make an informed voting decision. We've designed each element of this website to provide information on Utah judges in the most user-friendly fashion.

Jennifer Yim, JPEC executive director

Costs for JPEC

Planned launch date: August 1, 2016
Actual launch date: September 1, 2016
Planned development time: 10 weeks
Actual development time: 14 weeks
Planned development costs: \$27,550
Actual development costs: \$27,550

Accessibility and Security

Usability- While accommodating over 667 browser and operating system combinations in addition to enabling digital assistants, semantic search, and structured markup, Utah uses audit tools to inform 508 compliance for disability accessibility.

Accessibility- All Utah.Gov services are fully accessible regardless of device. We conduct in-house and independent audit tools to make sure all applications are accessible to users.

Security and Privacy— Security is a top priority for the Utah.gov team that is responsible for processing the 13 million financial transactions completed online each year. The state of Utah and Utah.gov take security very seriously especially protecting users personal identity and their financial information as stated in the following policies.

<http://www.utah.gov/security.html>

<http://www.utah.gov/privacypolicy.html>

Marketing

The JPEC website was marketed through a marketing and public relations campaign targeted residents of Utah, search engine optimization, and direct in-application-marketing on the website.

[Newly updated website helps voters review judges before elections](#)

[Utah judicial review aims to help voters judge judges](#)

[Commission launches new website to inform voters about Utah judges](#)

Significance

Beneficiaries

A voter's voice is the most important component of the judicial retention process. Casting an informed vote allows Utah residents to make community-based decisions about which judges should serve another term of office.

Relevance

Even though judges may seem distant from our daily lives, there is information available to help make these important decisions. Judicial elections are opportunities for local control about who we think should continue to be vested with the power to influence our lives and communities.

Strategy

Utah's merit retention system asks voters to be engaged. By law, JPEC makes recommendations to retain or not retain every judge on the ballot. Ultimately, it is voters not JPEC who decide whether a judge should continue to serve.

Impact

Time Savings & Convenience

The JPEC website primarily provides time savings to the residents of Utah. By providing useful statistics and information for Utah residents, the website saves valuable time and energy by aggregating reviews of judges.

Informed Electorate

During the November election there was one judge that was given a recommendation of "not retain" by the JPEC. This information was displayed on the Judges website and led to press about the performance of this judge. This judge did win reelection in the district however, her poll numbers were 10% lower than the other judges in her district. The message about her performance did get communicated to the citizens of Utah.