

Open Manifesto Project

Introduction:

In response to the generalized lack of political accountability and availability of clear public information, we developed an intelligent assistant that provides an open and easy access to electoral programmes. The Personal Political Analyst (PPA) is a project led by the Civic Technology and Empowerment Chair (Delegació de Transparència i Govern Obert de la Diputació de València with the Polytechnical University of Valencia) and Political Watch.

The PPA is a voice assistant built on top of Google Platform that allows queries and consultations of the electoral promises made by the different political parties in the General, European, regional and local Spanish elections. The objective of this project is to promote public accountability of the political class, as well as citizen participation at the different governmental levels.

In Spain, the reality is that each political party develops their electoral programmes following a different structure. And not only that, also electoral programmes tend to be available only a few days before the elections – sometimes less than a week before –, they are extremely long – almost 300 pages in some cases – and confusing. And, very little after the elections have passed they tend to disappear from the web pages of the parties.

All these elements make it almost impossible for citizens to have any kind of control over the information published during the electoral process, so nobody really knows what are the real promises made by the different parties. A big added problem is that electoral programmes disappear once the elections are over. There is no way of monitoring because, as you don't know what parties have promised, you can't demand anything from them during the next 4 years of government.

Taking this situation into account, the Civic Technology and Empowerment Chair (Delegació de Transparència i Govern Obert de la Diputació de València with the Polytechnical University of Valencia) and Political Watch started the Open Manifesto Project, and then developed the PPA.

Project objectives:

This project had two main goals. Firstly to provide citizens with easy access to the content of electoral programmes, and secondly to enhance their capacity to monitor those electoral promises during the elections but also once the electoral process is over.

To achieve this goals, two different process where needed:

- The development (through a collaborative process) of an open and public standard to simplify the structure of electoral programmes, focusing on the main elements any programme should have in order to make them easy to access and compare by the citizenry, media and CSO.
- Once the standard was established, the development of an easy-to-use tool directed to citizens, so they could access the programmes, and do all the consultations needed to make their voting decisions and also to monitor the execution of those promises once the elections were over.

Main results:

The project and both processes needed were focused mainly on serving citizens. That is why we held as many public consultations as we could, in order to know the needs of citizens, media, CSO and even political representatives. Also, the standard was developed following the open source principles; therefore all the information and processes generated were and are open to the citizenry or any interested parties.

The process of creating the standard followed an iterative development model composed by the following phases:

- **Phase I: Study and Analysis:** By way of work sessions and face-to-face or online interviews with political parties, social agents and citizens, information needs were determined and catalogued in relation to the electoral manifestos and proposals, and a series of use cases were developed to serve as guidelines for the creation and adoption of the standard.
- **Phase II: Proposal and Feasibility:** Based on the information generated, the structure and the attributes to be included in the open standard were defined. Each proposal was evaluated by the technical team to determine the appropriate data type to be used and the feasibility of automatically generating the necessary information. Likewise, the incremental adaptation over the previous version was resolved.
- **Phase III: Validation:** Once the proposal and feasibility stage had passed, the new version of the open standard was generated and documented in JSON Schema format. A process of validation by the parties involved was then initiated.
- **Phase IV: Publication:** After validation, the new version was published together with the documentation produced. All the information produced was published under an open license, without dependencies to other standards that are not open and free of legal or technical clauses that may limit its use in any area.

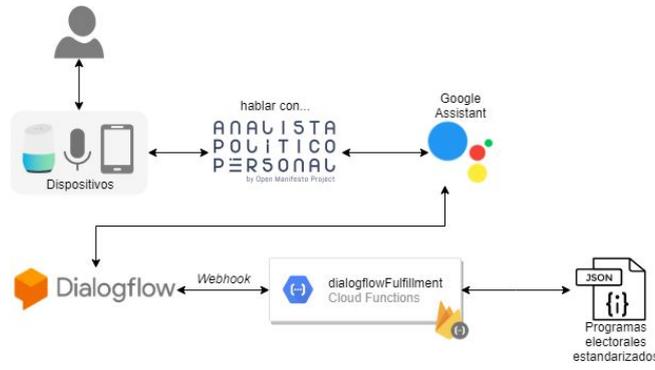
The result of the process was a standard for electoral manifestos, a structured format that any political party (not only in Spain but anywhere) can follow when publishing their manifestos in order to enhance citizens' understanding and capacity to demand accountability. The standard was achieved by:

- Applying the same format and structure to the electoral manifestos of all political parties, making it easier to compare them.
- Organizing the proposals of political parties in an explicit and concrete manner, classified by topics. In this way it becomes easier to know the positions and proposals of different political parties concerning any given issue, thus allowing users to make more informed decisions.
- Indicating the level of importance political parties give to each of their proposals. This way users would find out, for instance, the "red lines" parties are not willing to cross and the sequence of implementation of their proposals.
- Publishing electoral manifestos in an open format that is easy to access. The information contained in the manifestos is accessible to everyone, at any time (even after elections), for consultation or to be reused for other purposes.
- Transforming the electoral manifestos into a manageable and accessible instrument for citizens and other interested parties (such as journalists) not only for political parties.
- Improving the capacity for cooperation and dialogue between political parties, public administrations, social agents and citizens.
- Allowing the interconnection of electoral manifestos with other political information, through civic tech tools.

Once the first version of the standard was achieved we started a dialogue process with political parties with the intention of making them adopt it before the elections. Due to the lack of reply of most political parties, our team started to adapt by ourselves all the european, national and regional programmes to the standard. Once this was done, we were in possession of a database with every electoral programme, all of them with the same structure and categories, making it simpler to compare and contrast.

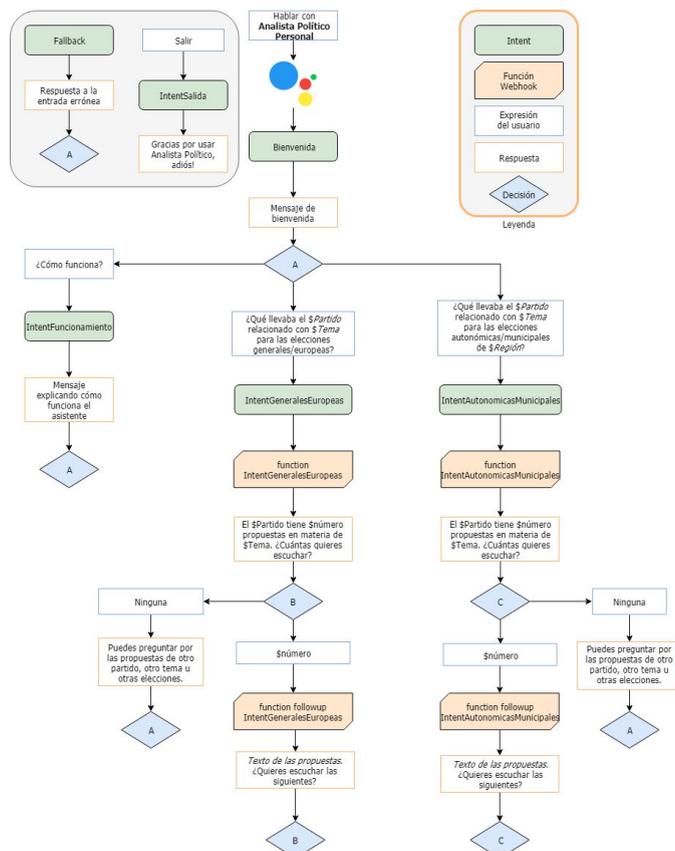
Also, once we had a homogenized database with all the electoral programmes, we decided to develop a tool that could make it easy for users to access the database and, most importantly, to convert the data into valuable and useful information. To face this challenge in an innovative way, because probably a web page with a comparison table between programmes would have been easier, we developed the PPA, a voice assistant built using Google Platform, available for every person with an Android phone.

The PPA was developed using DialogFlow, a natural language understanding platform to create an app that could offer interactive voice response to users. The idea was to offer a simple and easy way to access the information regarding the electoral promises of every party, and to compare the different promises made by each of them.



Components flow

We developed a conversational diagram, including different types of questions that could be made by users (mainly declarative and comparative in the first version). We then trained the PPA and with the help of volunteers we improved the quality of the responses. The first version was launched by October 2019, a month before the elections.



Conversational Diagram used for the PPA

One important element that we wanted to focus on was interoperability; that is why we followed Schema.org's recommendations when developing the Open Manifesto's

format. Also, our voice assistant is built on top of Google Platform and we use DialogFlow as a way to interpret natural language.

From the beginning of the project, the team developed a communication strategy that implied meetings with several CSOs, citizenship and media as well as participatory workshops with citizenship and media. These alliances and supports will ensure the participation at long term level. Moreover, a communication online strategy developed specifically for this project will guarantee the engagement of new users and promote the participation of citizenship.

Challenges:

One of the main challenges we found at the beginning of the project was to transform the political manifestos from PDF format to structured and semantic JSON data (Open Manifesto format). So, our mission was to publish all those data in open data format, allowing anyone to build new apps with them, like we did by building the PPA. It's important to remember that if electoral programmes are built in origin using this (or any similar) standard, we wouldn't have had to transform all those PDF into a structured format, so it would be one less step to deal with. That is why we set meetings with representatives from every major political party, to explain the standard and encourage them to build their programmes using it.

The second main challenge we had to face was to set meetings with the major political parties, partly because of the complex political situation in Spain during 2019 (two general elections (April and November) plus autonomic and european elections). In this context it was difficult to contact the parties, as the people we wanted to deal with were 'in the eye of the storm' during those months. Even though we were able to meet with 2 out of the 4 main national political parties (in the first stage we tried to contact with Ciudadanos, PSOE, PP and Unidas Podemos), only Unidas Podemos agreed to apply the standard for the November election (and, in the end, they could not manage to do it).

On the positive side, every political representative we met with was very interested in the standard, and gave us many useful suggestions to make it more accessible for political parties. We truly believe that under other circumstances we would have achieved better results regarding the adoption of the standard by political parties.

All the problems related to the adoption of the standard caused many delays in the implementation of the PPA, mainly because we needed all the programmes to be already homogeneous before we could add them to the app (and many programmes were not even published until one week before the elections). Also the political

context, with people already tired of so many electoral appointments, made it more difficult to get people to know and use our app, especially without a bigger budget to spend on human resources and advertising.

Finally, once the elections had passed the challenge was, and still is, to keep the conversations with the parties alive in order to achieve bigger commitments to the standard so in the following elections they can adopt it straightforwardly, without the need for a team like us to translate the documents into a more structured format. The other challenge is to keep track of the promises the parties made, especially now that the COVID pandemic has changed completely the social and economic context, and that most people do not remember the promises of the parties they voted for.