

\*The article below (written by Gannet News wire) has been picked up by at least 4-5 papers, including the Arizona Republic, the Salinas Californian, the Reno Gazette Journal, and the Desert Sun (CA).

## **Group wants Latinos at polls**

*Activists take advantage of technology*

By DIANA MARRERO

The Salinas Californian Washington Bureau

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WASHINGTON - Text messaging worked so well in rallying young Latinos to immigration protests this spring, including several held in Salinas and Seaside, that political activists want to apply the technology another way: to register those young people to vote.

The message is a simple one, said Maria Teresa Petersen, executive director of Voto Latino, which plans to register at least 35,000 young Latinos nationwide through the text message initiative.

"You've marched," Petersen said. "Now you've got to register and now you've got to vote."

Voto Latino, founded by actress Rosario Dawson, is among a number of political organizations targeting young Latinos for voter outreach efforts. The group plans to launch its initiative early next month.

From Phoenix to Nashville to Detroit, political organizers are holding events to register Latino voters, teaching new Americans about the democratic process and helping immigrants become U.S. citizens as part of "Democracy Summer."

No rallies have yet been planned in Monterey County, but the Salinas-based Citizenship Project launched a voter registration drive June 27 with a forum on the Latino vote.

Latinos make up about 14 percent of the U.S. population but accounted for only 6 percent of voters in 2004, according to the Pew Hispanic Center. About 34 percent of Latinos are under 18.

### **30,000 unregistered in Salinas**

About 30,000 people in east Salinas are eligible to vote but have not yet registered, said Cesar Lara, executive director of the Citizenship Project in Salinas. Close to half of those people are between the ages of 18 and 24, he said.

"It's not just a question of who you can register now, it's who are you influencing for the 2008 elections as well," said Antonio Tijerino, president of the Hispanic Heritage Foundation.

Rachel Gomez, 24, is among the young adults who could help do it.

A sales coordinator at Univision Channel 67, KSMS in Monterey, Gomez registered to vote as soon as she turned 18.

"All my family is registered, so it was just the thing to do," she said. "It's just something my family always did."

Gomez said everyone she knows is registered to vote.

## **The power of text messaging**

Lara, 29, said the Latino community would benefit if more of its youth had that attitude. He said his group plans to join forces with the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials (NALEO) in efforts to register young Latinos to vote.

"It's a universe that has the potential to make a difference but for some reason hasn't been engaged," said Lara.

He said he hasn't heard if the text message campaign will be used with prospective Salinas-area voters.

Voto Latino is working with the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, NALEO and Mobile Voter on the voter registration project.

Mobile Voter, a San Francisco-based nonprofit, used text messages to register young people to vote two years ago.

Through text messaging, musicians at a concert, for example, can ask their fans to text Voto Latino to register to vote. Those fans would receive an immediate response from Voto Latino with instructions on how to get a voter registration form.

They also could forward that message to their friends. Mobile Voter could then track whether they actually registered to vote, remind them if they did not and send another reminder on Election Day.

Claudio Valenzuela, acting Monterey County Registrar of Voters, said he fully supports the idea of voter registration outreach to young Latinos.

"The (text messaging) program sounds like a great idea to get more voters to come out," Valenzuela said.

More than 207 million Americans own cellular phones, according to the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association.

The popularity of text messages is surging among Americans: During December 2004, the number of monthly text messages was 4.8 billion; by December 2005, that number increased to 9.8 billion, according to the group.

The use of the technology is even more prevalent among youth and Latino cell phone users. About 65 percent of Americans between the ages of 18 and 29 use text messaging; 54 percent of Latinos use the technology. By comparison, only about 35 percent of the general population does, according to a recent study by the Pew Internet & American Life project.