

SAMPLE

ROCKING THE VOTE, WIRELESSLY

New campaigns spread the word via text messages.

Text messages, typically reserved for flippant, abbreviated statements like "Where r u?" and "C u ltr," are becoming socially conscious. Tech-savvy activists have swayed elections, toppled corrupt politicians, and saved baby seals with a message as long as this sentence.

More effective than e-mail and cheaper than snail mail, SMS campaigns have been gaining ground as a powerful tool for inspiring civic action and social awareness. They don't create spam, and because most people have their phones with them at all times, text messages carry more personal weight than an e-mail.

"You're reaching out in the post-modern sense and touching an individual," said Ben Rigby, co-executive director of Mobile Voter. Rigby's San Francisco-based non-profit is using the power of text messaging to reach potential voters in the 18-to-29-year-old demographic.

The TXTVOTER '06 campaign breaks down the greatest obstacle to voting: registration. Rigby hopes the initiative inspires immediate action by allowing cell phone users to receive voter registration forms by simply texting a code they see on a flier or billboard.

Mobile Voter has also partnered with Music For America to sponsor concerts around the country where performers such as Death Cab for Cutie and Green Day will announce a special code during their performances. Fans who text the code will then receive a reply asking them to send their name and address where they can receive registration forms. They'll receive a reminder text on Election Day as well.

"Text messaging is a native tongue of today's



youth," Rigby said. "We used a pre-existing form of communication to get interest and facilitate the process of participation."

Text messaging campaigns have several drawbacks, the most obvious being the message length. An SMS message is limited to 160 characters. Limitations are also created by carrier restrictions. Text campaigns have to be approved, which can be an arduous process, and because campaigners pay a fee to the Short Code Association while they wait, it can cost them up to \$1,000 a month. Fundraising efforts that occur over SMS are limited because carriers take 40 to 50 percent of the money generated, although emerging payment mechanisms like PayPal Mobile could change this. The tsunami relief effort in 2005 represents the only time carriers waived the overhead charge.

In 2005, a group of activists formed MobileActive, a global network of activists interested in building mobile campaigns and forums for discussing the use of cell phones for civic engagement. Katrin Verclas, the group's organizer, believes that the mobile space has enormous potential, not only because of the accessibility of text messaging, but because of the creative ways activists are incorporating the medium into their causes.

"There's no limit to the human spirit and the human mind for cutting edge projects and innovations," she said. —Lindsey Reu

"We're using the native tongue of today's youth to facilitate the process of participation."

—Ben Rigby, co-executive director, Mobile Voter



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