

September 30, 2006. **0 comments.** Topic: **Elections and Voting**

Mobile Voter Uses Text Messaging for California Voter Registration

By Grace Stanat

In 2000, youth voting rates reached a nadir at 36.1%. This rate jumped by 11% in 2004, due largely to the remarkable efforts of youth mobilization organizations. While these gains are impressive, there is still a long way to go; youth voting rates lag 19% behind those of older voters. A CIRCLE study states that "traditional approaches to [youth voting] are ineffective with the new generation... In order to truly connect with young voters, the parties must develop novel approaches... [they] need to get hip." By 2015, Gen Y will be a whopping 37% of the electorate, so it is obviously critical to the future of our democracy to engage youth.



Enter Mobile Voter, a nonprofit nonpartisan organization dedicated to using mobile technology (i.e., cell phones) to engage youth civically. Mobile Voter's current project is called TxtVoter, which uses text messaging to facilitate voter registration.

Text messaging has the potential to connect with youth in new, exciting, and effective ways. Over 80% of young people own a mobile phone and more than 65% regularly send text messages. They are a generation that has grown up with text messaging; it has surpassed email as their primary means of peer-to-peer communication. TxtVoter is easy to use, hip, and free. People simply text the keyword 'voter' to 75444 (similar to how people vote for their favorite singer on American Idol) and we begin the registration process. People can then choose whether they prefer a pre-filled registration form mailed to them, or to complete the form online and then print and mail it.



Even more exciting is the ability for other organizations to run their own text message based voter registration campaigns using TxtVoter, absolutely free of charge. To date, over 150 organizations are running their own TxtVoter campaigns, including Voto Latino, Working Assets, the Forward Together Pac (Mark Warner), World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), and many others. One local campaign using TxtVoter is Rob Black, running for Supervisor in San Francisco District 6. Each organization has its own keyword (or several). So for example, WWE encourages viewers to text the keyword 'wwe' to 75444. Mobile Voter takes care of the rest. See www.txtvoter.org for details.

Another TxtVoter feature provides organizations with the ability to use text messaging to register people's friends, spreading the word even farther. With Register Your Friends, individuals are prompted to enter their friends' cell phone numbers on a web page. Then TxtVoter sends each friend a personalized text message asking them to register. These web pages can be branded TxtVoter or easily branded for any organization – Mobile Voter provides all the code free of charge.

And lastly, TxtVoter also has an online component that anybody can use: www.govote.org. This site was built in partnership with Working Assets and is the

most comprehensive online voter registration tool currently available. Of course, anyone and everyone is encouraged to send people to this site. Since registration deadlines are very soon, the *best* registration tactic at this time is for organizations to send emails to their contact lists urging them to register. Please contact Mobile Voter if you'd like a special link to GoVote that will allow tracking of all registrants from a specific email.

For all these methods, Mobile Voter tracks the users from beginning to end and collects contact information. Mobile Voter has the ability to provide organizations with the contact information of the people that they registered after the campaign. This can be very useful for building organization lists and for reaching out to constituencies at a future date.

Mobile Voter is a nonpartisan nonprofit organization. TxtVoter is part of Young Voter Strategies, a program administered by The George Washington School of Political Management and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts. The TxtVoter project has also received support from The MacArthur Foundation.

Mobile Voter's Executive Directors are Ben Rigby and Grace Stanat. Both have backgrounds in the Web industry. Grace founded 415 Productions, Inc., a boutique web design firm serving primarily large brands and nonprofits, in 1996 and can be reached at grace@mobilevoter.org. Grace's innovative management style has been featured in USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, BusinessWeek and on NPR and Good Morning America.



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