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## Text message voter registration encourages young voters

October 4th, 2006

Jacob Minnick , CT Staff Writer



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A new, more efficient way of voter registration is being promoted and dispersed throughout the country. A non-profit and non-partisan project called Mobile Voter has developed a campaign to help make voting less of a hassle by combining the ideas of cellular technology and voter registration.

Based in San Francisco, the organization is working to provide a method of participation that is aimed at the young voter demographic of the American population.

“We’re targeting youth because they care about what goes on around them,” said Ben Rigby, founder of Mobile Voter.

Rigby, along with Grace Stanat, officially launched the organization in 2004. Originally they were working without any type of outside funding and using any spare time to make progress on their project.

Rigby and Stanat were committed to the idea that participation and interaction creates change. Together, they are focused on creating a better way of drawing in higher numbers of young voters to participate in all forms of elections in their states.

“Our mission is to use mobile technology to facilitate interaction between the two entities,” said Grace Stanat, co-executive director of Mobile Voter. “We started Mobile Voter because it’s unacceptable that such a low number of youths are registered to vote or are actually voting. We believe being involved in the political system is the best way to make changes for the better.”

Registering through cell phones is relatively simple. After texting the keyword “voter” to 75444, a reply message is sent asking for more information in order to send registration forms through mail.

People may also help others register by listing a friend’s cell phone number and having a message sent directly to them.

Another component of the project is to allow users to create and run their own individual campaigns. These services have no charge as long as one represents a non-partisan and non-profit organization.

Mobile Voter has grown significantly since its start and has received a considerable amount of interest from voters, activist groups and politicians.

This year Mobile Voter received its first form of funding in the form of a grant from Pew Charitable Trusts. Several people have also joined Rigby and Stanat working for Mobile Voter part-time in outreach efforts and web promotion techniques such as MySpace.

Mobile Voter represents the growing trend of text messaging as a significant and reliable source of intertwining technology and politics. A total of 48 U.S. states, excluding North Dakota and Wyoming, are actively engaged in the project.

In Virginia, former democratic Governor Mark Warner and his “Forward Together” campaign recently joined in promotion of Mobile Voter to the youth in the state.

“The political system usually tends to lag behind in terms of using new technology. Politicians and activists groups are embracing the concept of using different methods of participation,” Stanat said.

Although the amount of young people voting is steadily increasing, the 18- to 24-year-old demographic of the population is continually the lowest percentage in voting participation.

“For a long time both major parties agreed that it’s really important to reach youth -- they just haven’t figured it out,” Stanat said. “We are trying to show them there is a medium they can use and that it will work.”

Approximately 20,000 people have already registered and they expect thousands more during the last few days of the registration period, Stanat said. Mobile Voter hopes to register at least 50,000 people by the end of this year’s registration period and to register even more in the future.

Mobile Voter is specifically intent on demonstrating that text messaging is an important and valuable means of communication between political groups and their constituents.

“It’s important that this age group’s values and demands are represented and the best way to do that is through elected officials,” Stanat said.

“I think it would save students a lot of time to register that way,” said freshman mechanical engineering major Nathan Spady. “It’s encouraging to people who’ve never had voting experience to get involved.”