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Text Messages Register Gen-Y Voters
Tracy Staedter, Discovery News

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Oct. 4, 2006 — A voter campaign aimed at people aged 18 to 29 is using text messaging to prompt Generation Y to register.

The TxtVoter project, led by the San Francisco-based non-profit Mobile Voter, aims to register 55,000 young voters for the Nov. 7 general election.

Not only could the campaign impact this year's voting outcome, it could plant seeds of political action sooner rather than later among young Americans, project members believe.

"By 2015, generation Y will be a staggering 37 percent of the electorate. That's bigger than the baby boomers and much more diverse," said Grace Stanat, who along with Ben Rigby is co-executive director of Mobile Voter, which focuses on using mobile technology to engage youth in civic action.

Unfortunately, there has been a downward trend in youth voting for the last 30 years, said Stanat.

"We know that politicians want to reach this age group. We also know they don't know how. They don't know what messages to send or what media to use," said Stanat.

Thanks to the cell phone, politicians may finally have an in.

It turns out that 80 percent of people aged 18 to 29 own cell phones, and 65 percent of 18 to 27-year-olds text message on a regular basis.

Stanat and Rigby decided to capitalize on that fact and enlist the technology to encourage people to register.

They launched Mobile Voter in 2004 and received funding this year from the Pew Charitable Trusts as part of Young Voter Strategies, a nationwide non-partisan project to accumulate and provide data related to youth voting trends.

With that funding, Mobile Voter began the TxtVoter campaign, which makes it possible to register by sending a text message.

The interested person simply text messages the keyword "voter" to 75444.

The phone message is sent to a computer at Mobile Voter that is able to receive and send messages like a phone, but can also store information in a database.

The computer replies with a text message, asking the person for a name and address.

That information goes into the database, which automatically personalizes a registration form according to each state's guidelines. The form is mailed to the registrant, who just has to sign, date and mail it back.

On election day, Mobile Voter sends a text message reminder, complete with polling location.

Mobile Voter spurs not only individuals but groups to action by encouraging people to take on their own campaign.

For example, organizations can sign up for individualized keywords on the Mobile Voter Web site. Group members then register to vote by text messaging the keyword to 75444, and the organization can keep track of how many members have registered.

"Text messaging is most powerfully used when it's immediate and in the moment. It's better than sending people home with a flyer and an envelope," said Julie Germany, deputy director of the Institute for Politics, Democracy and the Internet at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

So far, Mobile Voter has helped register 15,000 people and is planning big push in October as state registration deadlines near.

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