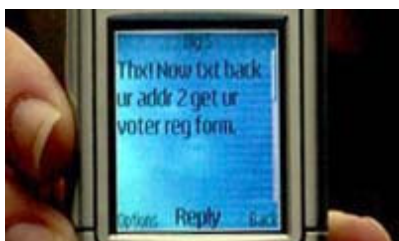




4 Easy Voter Reg, Txt Me



By Rebekah Dryden, NYU Livewire

Two digital execs started a text messaging campaign to sign notoriously resistant young people up to vote. Now, will it work?

Text the word "vote" from a cell phone to 75444 and you'll get this reply: "Thx! Now txt back ur addr 2 get ur voter reg form." Welcome to voter registration in the tech-savvy world of Gen Y. Two former web execs are harnessing an up-to-the-minute social tool—the text message—to lure young people into civic participation.

"We wanted to give as much power to them as possible, because we think the future depends on them," said Grace Stanat, who with colleague Ben Rigby runs the San Francisco-based nonprofit Mobile Voter. The pair founded the group to use text messaging to sign up new voters.

People can start signing up right over their cell phones.

Japhet Koteen, 33, who had just moved to Seattle and wanted to update his registration, heard about this from a friend in a Seattle bar. He texted the word "vote" to the number his friend gave him. A few minutes later, he had a reply.



"They just wanted to verify that I'm the correct person, and ask me to text back my name and address," Koteen said. A voter registration form arrived in the mail, with his personal info already filled in. "All I had to do was sign it, put a stamp on it, and put it back in the mail," he said.

Stanat, 41, and Rigby, 37, made careers of understanding the technology and habits of youth, working for clients like Sony Playstation, Nokia and Yahoo. Rigby started Mobile Voter two years ago, because it bothered him that young people weren't voting. Stanat joined him in 2005.

"The mobile phone is the perfect medium, because it has replaced e-mail as the preferred peer-to-peer communication method," Stanat argued. A Pew Research

Center study last April confirmed that text messaging is pretty popular among the young: 65% of 18- to 29-year-olds said they use it.

More than 20,000 new voters signed up during this year's campaign, Txt Voter 2006, Stanat said.

Text messaging as a political tool isn't new. Howard Dean and others used it to communicate with supporters in 2004. There's no research, yet, to say whether that's what helped raise the youth vote— turnout among 18-29 year olds, declining for decades, spiked nine points that year -- but text messaging is a sensible way to reach new voters, said Scott Keeter, director of survey research at Pew. That age group has been comparatively ignored by the candidates in recent elections, he said. "To some extent, that's rational, because they don't tend to turn out," he said.

The text message campaign won a \$222,000 grant from the Young Voter Strategies Program, based at George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management, and \$75,000 from the MacArthur Foundation. The funds were used to help more than 200 youth voting campaigns, by such groups as World Wrestling Entertainment, Black Youth Vote, Voto Latino and the League of Young Voters, to use text messaging in their work.

Response was positive, said Sam Dorman, tech director of The League of Young Voters, which used text message signups at its Pittsburgh affiliate. The key to getting young people to vote is convincing them that politics isn't, "In some other boring category, separate from the rest of life," Dorman said. "If young people are comfortable communicating by text message, that's where they'll talk about these issues," he said.

Many Gen Y political activists agree that the way to reach busy young people is by being with them, as they walk to class, take a work break or go to a party. Text messaging is more convenient for recruiters, too: Yes Duffy, starting grad school at the University of California at Berkeley, didn't have time to drive cross-country registering swing-state voters, as he did in 2004. So he drove to California from his Seattle home with a "text vote" message pasted in his van window. Duffy has since registered people from the back seat of a car, and enroute to a bowling alley. "Going and filling out a form outside a grocery store is not something teenagers usually do," he said.

Voto Latino volunteer Emanuel Pleitez, 23, says he knows his text registration push at Stanford University has created a lot of buzz, because strangers contact him about it on MySpace. The abbreviation-heavy lingo, he said, is part of the appeal.

Txt Voter will get its real test on Election Day: Will the new registrants turn out this November 7? Campaigners will text out reminders, in many cases including the address of the registrant's polling place.

Though the method has limitations – it lacks a paper trail, and one can't say too much in 30 words -- Stanat predicts text messaging will be a campaign staple by 2008.

"I think as the technology progresses, the use of this medium can evolve a long way,"

he said. "By 2008, if you're not using this to register people, to get out the vote, or to reach your constituents, you're missing the boat."

Mobile Voter founder Ben Rigby (*photo above*) signs up new voters in San Francisco. The campaign, which uses cell phone text messaging to help people register, claims to have generated 20,000 signups this year.

Photo Courtesy of Mobile Voter

20:59:55 - 01.11.06 - Arizona News Features - Readers 1149.

Arizona News Arizona Reporter Bangor News Arizona Events Bangor News
American Idol Results Idol Chat MDCCLXXVI

Cell Phone Plans Office Furniture Fundraising Tax News Briefcases Cruises Tax Software
TV Shows Everybody Loves Raymond Family Guy King of Queens Seinfeld Sex and the City

Article URL: <http://www.azreporter.com/index.php?itemid=979>
