



## RU a Txt Votr? Text Messaging Registers Young Latinos

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*Editor's Note: A first-of-its-kind effort to engage young Latinos in the political process has prompted an estimated 36,000 to register to vote. Daffodil Altan is a writer and editor at New America Media.*

SAN FRANCISCO--The numbers are in, and the drive to register a million new voters after massive immigrants' rights marches earlier this year came up short. But most analysts missed an experimental and successful registration process that sought to engage young Latino voters a la "American Idol." Using cell phone text messaging technology and online networking sites like MySpace, young voters reached out to other young voters via the digital maze that now dominates communication among the 35-and-under crowd.



"We actually started shopping this around last December, and everyone kept saying, 'No. There's a digital divide, Latinos aren't online,'" says Maria Teresa Petersen, executive director of Voto Latino, "I said, 'Are you kidding me?'" The non-partisan, youth-driven organization partnered with Mobile Voter, which developed the text messaging voter technology, to launch the first of its kind voter-registration drive in the United States. "Our efforts were vindicated when all of a sudden on March 23 all these kids started marching and CNN was scrambling to figure out how they started organizing and how they were doing it: Myspace and text messaging."

It's called viral, peer-to-peer communication, Petersen says, and corporate America figured it out a long time ago. Petersen left the corporate world and put to use what she'd learned.

The voting potential among young Latinos is huge, Petersen says. "Fifty-thousand young Latinos turn 18 every month in the United States, 87 percent of whom are eligible to vote," she says. Young Latinos are the country's fastest growing demographic; 34 percent of Latinos are under age 18. A Pew Research study on cell phone usage found that 54 percent of cell phone-owning Latinos use text messaging, compared to 31 percent of whites. Nearly half of the 43 million U.S. Latinos are online.

"Five years ago I didn't have a cell phone. Five years ago the freshmen here didn't have a cell phone. But four years ago they did. Four years ago I did," says Emmanuel Pleitez, a Stanford University senior and Voto Latino volunteer who is attached to dozens of online listserves. Pleitez has a profile on the popular college networking site Facebook as well as MySpace, where he urges friends and acquaintances to register to vote. "If hanging out happens online, we need to figure out how to "hang out" and target those 'hanging out' places online," he says.

The core of the drive, Petersen says, was to give young people the digital tools to lead their own mini-voter registration drives. "It's no longer an organization telling you to vote, it's your friend telling you to vote. It's peer to peer." All a young person needed, she says, was a key word and a five-digit number. Voto Latino created a few key words, like "Voto" and "Represent," which anyone could use. Volunteers could also pick their own keyword and give it to friends to text to a predetermined 5-digit number set up by Mobile Voter. The automated response then sent a message back to the user's cell phone asking for an e-mail address. The user sent the information via text message and received a voter registration form to fill out online, or had a preprinted form sent to their home address.

"The whole thing is that we're creating buzz," Pleitez says. "I've actually received messages about Voto Latino through Myspace and Facebook, and I don't even know who they're from."

Text messaging isn't new to the political scene. In 2004, Howard Dean's presidential campaign borrowed a strategy used by young voters in the Philippines and used text messaging to garner support. But this is the first time cell phones have been used as a quick, immediate pathway to voter

registration.

"It seemed like text messaging could make voter registration very easy," says Ben Rigby, co-founder of Mobile Voter, which developed the software for the Txt Votr campaign, and along with Voto Latino, partnered with about 200 smaller groups like Black Youth Vote and World Wrestling Entertainment to utilize text registration. "With text messaging we could enable someone to do it in the places where young people live their lives -- in the coffee shop, at a concert, when a young person is already engaged in doing something else."

Traditional drives, like the Southwest Voter Registration Project, which launched a national, 129-college campus registration campaign at the beginning of September and did not partner with Mobile Voter, yielded a little over 14,000 new voters. Voto Latino, which launched its campaign with TxtVoter and Working Assets at the same time, registered the bulk of its approximately 36,000 voters under 30 years old via the online registration tool called govote.org and the rest through the text messaging tool.

"We're trying to change the mindset that political engagement is in some boring category separate from the rest of life," says Sam Dorman, National Online and Technology Director for the League of Young Voters. "When we talk about politics, we're talking about our father's job, our grandma's health care, or our sister's education. So if young people are already communicating about those issues by text message, we need to be there with them."

Although Voto Latino did not reach its goal of registering 50,000 new voters, it came close. Organizers say this is just the beginning. "Before, it was just talk about 'Latinos all over the country and in different cities.' But when we can see it online and I can see someone from New Jersey messaging me, and it's a Latina who's trying to do voter registration, it gets me excited," says Stanford's Pleitez. "I think after this month, people are gonna know about text messaging. They're gonna know that this process exists," he says. "And that's a huge victory."

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