MobileActive.org

Cell phones for civic engagement.

Mobile**Active**

is a project of Green Media Toolshed and NTEN: Your Nonprofit Technology Community.

About the MobileActive.org Strategy Guide Series

MobileActive is a global community of strategists, activists, and technologists who are using mobile phones in their social change work. This series of Strategy Guides examines the effectiveness of nonprofits using mobile phones to build their constituent lists, influence political causes, and raise money. Our goal is to aggregate strategies, case studies and lessons learned as a means to encourage the adoption of mobile phones use by nonprofits.

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MobileActive is directed by Martin Kearns of Green Media Toolshed who is the catalyst and inspiration behind MobileActive; and by Katrin Verclas.

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N-TEN
Nonprofit Technology Enterprise Network

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MOBILE PHONES IN ELECTIONS AND VOTER REGISTRATION CAMPAIGNS

Mobile phones are used to register citizens to vote, encourage involvement in elections, raise money for candidates, monitor election turnout, and expose electoral fraud.

Combined with other campaign strategies, they are a powerful emerging tool for democratic participation in civil society.

While the Internet has transformed local, national, and global societies with new means of communications and information access through websites, email and blogs, the mobile phone has emerged alongside it as a new tool for social, civic and political action.

Often compared to the Internet, mobile phones exhibit some unique characteristics that distinguish them from the online medium. Mobile phones are portable, affordable, and in widespread use.

Elections and voter registration campaigns are one arena where mobile phones have made an impact. MobileActive has observed the use of mobile phones to register voters, educate citizens on specific candidates or referenda, track electoral activities such as turnout and fraud, and raise money for candidates and parties.

While the use of mobile phones in elections and voter registration campaigns is still in an experimental stage, a lot has been learned about the characteristics of successful campaigns.

We share those findings in this **MobileActive** Strategy Guide, one of a series of guides devoted to the use of mobile phones in civil society.

ARE MOBILE PHONES RIGHT FOR YOU ?

➜ Read case studies from other organizations, participate in live mobile campaigns to see how it works, connect with mobile vendors to learn about tools and costs, and discuss strategy with other mobile phone campaigners at **MobileActive.org**

WHY ARE MOBILE PHONES USEFUL FOR ELECTIONS AND VOTER REGISTRATION CAMPAIGNS?

In many countries (particularly in the developing world) mobile phones are the easiest and least expensive way to get a phone line and are more pervasive than Internet access, so they offer a means to reach a broad constituency of citizens during an electoral period.

Young people that are often the target of voter registration campaigns are very comfortable using mobile phones and text messaging in particular.

The portability of mobile phones makes them useful as communications and reporting tools to make up for the wide geographic distribution of polling places on election day.

MobileActive.org

Text messaging is a major factor behind the popularity of mobile phones in addition to its usual voice capabilities. In some countries, texting is used by 75% of mobile phone users. In the U.S., due to the pervasiveness of the Internet and the pay-per-use cost model of texting, this rate is closer to 40%.

Mobile phones are a highly personal means of communication that allow political campaigners to bypass the mass media when targeting voters with electoral messages.

TRY A MOBILE CAMPAIGN TODAY

➔ Read about real mobile phone campaigns taking place today around the world at **Mobile**Active**.org** and have your mobile phone handy to participate. See how it works, and imagine how it might work for your campaign.

Mobile phone text messaging allows an organization to deliver an abstract or light version of content or call to action on the small mobile phone screen, and invites more detailed content usually via the Web or email.

Mobile phones have become sophisticated devices with varied content including audio, video, web and email, allowing individual users and networks to send and receive polling data with custom software, view partisan candidate messages, and hear politically-motivated ringtones.

As fundraising emerges as a common mobile phone activity, raising money for candidates and political parties will begin a new era of experimentation.

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF USING MOBILE PHONES FOR ELECTIONS AND VOTER REGISTRATION CAMPAIGNS?

• Mobile phones have yet to reach many rural areas due to limited coverage, so electoral and voter registration campaigns will be restricted in their reach.

• There are significant security concerns for some activists using mobile phones during elections in areas where SIM cards and accounts are registered and monitored by local authorities. **Mobile**Active** has developed a Security Guide for Activists.

• While some countries have high adoption rates of using text messaging as a mobile phone activity, many people are not familiar with receiving messages sent from a central computer, so participation rates in some countries may be low.

• Mobile phones offer limited interactivity and a very small screen.

• Mobile campaigners should be cautious about sending excessive amounts of SMS to opt-in participants.

SECURITY GUIDE FOR ACTIVISTS

➔ **http://mobileactive.org/security_guide**

MobileActive**.org

ELECTORAL MONITORING AND PARTICIPATION

During the past three years, text messaging has been credited with influencing elections in the Philippines, Thailand, Spain and South Korea to name just a few countries. Much of this influence is due to the already pervasive use of text messaging in these countries.

For example, in preparation for the February 2006 election in Thailand, the Thai Election Commission sent messages to 25 million cell phone customers reminding them to vote.

The message read:

You are cordially invited to exercise your right to vote on Feruary 6, between 8 am and 3 pm.

Concurrent with this official communiqué, The Nation, a Thai newspaper, reported on a grass-roots text messaging campaign among voters urging them to bring a pen with them to mark their ballots.

The SMS stated: "Don't use the rubber stamp provided [by the authorities] to prevent fakes. Tell all your friends too." The election was controversial and was boycotted by opposition parties. Thailand's premier resigned several months later in a surprise move fueled by two months of street demonstrations largely organized by text messaging and email, despite his election victory. Protesters accused the premier of corruption and abuse of power.

The grassroots mobilization after the election is an example of what the writer and commentator Howard Rheingold has termed a "smart mob," whereby organizers used text and online messaging to build street demonstrations and other forms of protest. The already common use of text messaging in Thailand was an important factor in the success of this tactic.

One of the earliest examples of the creative use of mobile phones in an election happened in the in the Philippines in 2004.

Filipino President Gloria Arroyo was hounded by a mobile phone ringtone made from a wiretapped recording of a phone conversation discussing the election results.

TXTPOWER.ORG

➔ TXTPower is a loose organization of cellphone users that aims to empower Filipinos both as consumers and as citizens. ➔ **www.txtpower.org**

The 17-second ringtone was based on an alleged phone conversation between her and an elections official during the controversial presidential race. Critics alleged that the conversation demonstrated her electioneering violations, though the government denied rigging the election.

The audio clips – now known as the "Hello Garci?" ringtone – were posted on the TxtPower website and have been downloaded over one million times, making it the most popular ringtones ever.

Despite a government warning that possession and dissemination of the audio clip is illegal under the country's anti-wiretapping law, the ringtone immediately became a hit in the Philippines, where more than 30 million cell phone users send roughly 200 million text messages daily.

TxtPower urged other Filipinos to compose ring tones based on the tapes, and at least three have been posted on the group's site. For Arroyo, the ringtone marks an ironic twist in the role that mobile phone technology has played in her political career. After all, she rose to power after a popular uprising that toppled her unpopular predecessor, Joseph Estrada. The 2001 revolt succeeded after tens of thousands of Filipino protesters responded to a call to mobilize, sent mainly via mobile phone text messages.

MOBILE PHONES IN ELECTION MONITORING

Mobile phones were used in large-scale election monitoring for the first time during the Montenegrin Referendum on Independence[1] in May 2006.

The U.S.-based **National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI)** successfully assisted the Center for Democratic Transition (CDT), an NDI partner and seasoned Montenegrin election monitoring organization, to monitor the referendum on independence using SMS text messaging for reporting. 200 observers around the country reported approximately eleven times each and submitted over 2,000 reports via SMS through the day of the voting.

CDT also used mass SMS messaging to quickly send information and instructions to observers.

Using this rapid reporting system, CDT was the only organization to project that the 50% turnout requirement had been met by mid-day. The system also allowed CDT to quickly determine that the referendum outcome would be "too close to call," since the projected results fell within the statistical margin of error.

Based on the numeric analysis provided by the system and qualitative reports taken by phone, CDT informed the public to await the official results of a complete count in which there should be confidence. CDT thus helped stabilize the political environment and enhanced its own credibility. This is first time a civic group has monitored an election and reported results completely with SMS messages including automated entry into a database for real-time analysis.

NDI.ORG

➔ NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. ➔ **www.ndi.org**

A series of conditions made SMS reporting for the Montenegro referendum possible. Those included: CDT was an experienced non-governmental organization, having observed several elections in the past; Montenegro has wide cell phone coverage; CDT observers and Montenegrins in general are experienced SMS users; and the reporting requirements were simple – cumulative turnout figures and basic yes/no election results data are well geared toward short SMS text message report format.

1: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Montenegrin_independence_referendum%2C_2006

WHAT TYPE OF MOBILE DATA SHOULD YOUR CAMPAIGN TRACK ?

➔ When using mobile phones for elections and voter registration campaigns, it's important to gather as much data as possible to understand what works and also to track your progress over time.

Target audience: Track the age, gender, ethnicity and spoken language of your target population so you can better understand what works.

Audience contact: Keep track of when you're gathering mobile data, such as concerts, events, and street teams, so you can understand what works and when.

Marketing effectiveness: What outreach tools performed best for you (billboards, flyers, hand bills, concert announcements)?

Initial mobile opt-in rate: How many individuals are opting in during your calls to action, and what percentage is this of the total audience at an event? What's your benchmark so you can track your progress over time?

Secondary mobile conversion rate: How many individuals are completing the opt-in process by providing you with an email address or a mail address? What's your benchmark so you can track your progress over time?

Follow-up conversion rate: If you have additional contact with mobile opt-in supporters at a later date, what is the participation rate of that group? You might invite people to download a voter registration form, or answer a short survey about whether they voted on election day.

Forward-to-a-friend rate: Were emails forwarded to friends and family? Survey your supporters and ask them what motivated them.

VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter registration is a new frontier for mobile phone use, particularly in the U.S., where voter participation is historically low. Several efforts have taken place and numerous new campaigns are under way as the next national election cycle approaches.

In 2004, U.S.-based **Rock the Vote** pioneered the use of mobile phones to engage a broad, national youth network as part of its mobile campaign.

Their media campaigns and street team activities are designed to increase youth voter turnout. The group coordinates voter registration drives, get-out-the-vote events, and voter education efforts. In additional to text messaging, Rock the Vote also experimented with instant messaging to reach youth through a volunteer-driven "tell-a-friend" campaign.

ROCKTHEVOTE.COM

➔ Rock the Vote was founded to engage youth in the political process by incorporating the entertainment community and youth culture into its activities. ➔ **www.rockthevote.com**

Rock the Vote Mobile engaged approximately 120,000 people, superceding its original goal of 100,000. A collaborative effort between Rock the Vote and Motorola, Rock the Vote Mobile worked to inform and motivate young voters to become participants in the 2004 election through the fusion of election year grassroots initiatives, wireless technology and pop culture.

Users received receive text alerts, polls and other Rock the Vote information on their phones. Other applications that were developed for the program included a website that could be accessed with a mobile phone, voter registration, a Bush/Kerry mobile boxing game, and a polling place locator available on Election Day.

Almost 10,000 people used Rock the Vote Mobile to begin their voter registration process. Free digital content including ringtones, wallpaper and screen savers, was made available to Rock the Vote Mobile users as incentives for opting in to the campaign.

Rock the Vote and Motorola sent more than 200,000 celebrity "robocalls" on November 1 urging mobile phone users to vote on November 2 and directing them to a polling place finder. Popular musicians such as Amber Tamblyn, Christina Applegate, Maggie Gyllenhaal, Jake Gyllenhaal, Josh Hartnet and Dule Hill recorded celebrity voice messages.

Cingular Wireless sent close to 50,000 Rock the Vote-branded celebrity "wake up" calls on

Election Day to its list.

In response to a growing curiosity in the media about taking the political pulse of a technologically-attuned demographic that relies heavily on the mobile phone, Zogby International and Rock the Vote Mobile broke new ground and teamed up days before the election to release the first-of-its-kind text-message poll of mobile phone users.

During the same election cycle, San Francisco - based **Mobile Voter** used text messaging to encourage voter registration among local voters. The SF Vote Campaign aimed to reach young voters at local music events. Pioneering a technique that has now become commonplace, performers made announcements from the stage between music sets, encouraging concertgoers to "text in" to a mobile "short code," which was then followed up by a reply text message asking for the respondents email address. Participants were then emailed a San Francisco voter registration form in PDF format which could be filled out and mailed from home.

MOBILEVOTER.ORG

➔ Founded in 2004, Mobile Voter is a non-profit, non-partisan organization seeking to facilitate the process of civic participation via mobile technology. ➔ **www.mobilevoter.org**

➔ Mobile Voter's current priority project, **TXTVOTER '06**, seeks to register young voters across the country in advance of the 2006 election. ➔ **www.txtvoter.org**

"This was an experimental stage," reflects Ben Rigby with Mobile Voter, "and we had very few tracking tools." They estimated that during those campaigns 16% of concertgoers texted in, with 75% of that group followed through and provided their email address.

While Mobile Voter was not able to obtain any metrics on actual voter registration by the participants, this early experiment provided a blueprint and a benchmark for engaging with people at events, a strategy that has since become the hallmark of other mobile engagement efforts used by such performers as U2 to raise money for international aid campaigns.

Mobile Voter conducted other campaigns in 2005, that used billboards and flyers around San Francisco to reach potential voters, and collaborated with local community agencies such as the Chinese American Voter Education Committee. This print media campaign had response rates under one percent, according to Rigby, and helped shape his understanding of how to use different media channels to reach a target audience to trigger a sizeable mobile opt-in rate.

Since then, Mobile Voter's efforts have centered more on music concerts and other event-based activities, where the concentration of people is high enough to ensure a strong response rate.

USES OF MOBILE PHONES

➔ **SMS:** Send up to 160 character text messages to the mobile phones of supporters.

➔ **Ringtones:** Offer politically-themed ringtone sounds for you or your callers to hear.

➔ **Short codes:** Use a six-digit "mobile short code" to recruit supporters at concerts and events.

➔ **Fundraising:** Raise money from supporters at concerts and events with your short code by charging instant donations to their phone bill.

➔ **Forward-to-a-Friend:** Encourage supporters to forward text messages, ringtones and short codes to friends and family.

Their **TXTVoter** service is designed to be used by community based organizations to register young voters at music concerts. Supported by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trust, their goal for 2006 is to help register 55,000 young people to vote.

One of Mobile Voter's partners this year is **Voto Latino** which will use the TXTVoter platform to register young Latino voters beginning in August 2006. Voto Latino's efforts to use mobile phone tools will build on a national community-based social network that will seek to reach over three million Latino youth at festivals, concerts, parades, and other events, using innovative outreach techniques such as postcards, online tools, and a system of awarding points to participating youth that do the most peer-to-peer outreach. Their numeric goal, according to Voto Latino Executive Director Maria Teresa Petersen, is to register 50,000 new Latino youth voters.

VOTOLATINO.ORG

➔ Founded in 2004, Voto Latino believes that American Latino youth have the power, voice and desire to participate in American politics. Voto Latino provides our members the tools to do it easily and seamlessly and the space to discuss politics openly. ➔ **www.votolatino.org**

"To meet this goal we've set our SMS participation benchmark at getting 100,000 youth to submit their mobile phone numbers, since our assumption is that 50% will follow-through to get registered." This high "conversion rate" is based upon recent research that demonstrates that youth are familiar and comfortable with online and mobile tools, and more likely to complete transactions.

One innovative aspect of Voto Latino's efforts is a largely paperless voter registration campaign, relying on online sytems to communicate with participants. This allows the campaign to otimize participant tracking, email communications, and reporting.

The "social networking" aspect of the campaign will build upon experiences that youth are familiar with, using online networks such as MySpace. Youth participants build personal profiles in the Voto Latino system, have access to peer-to-peer outreach tools, get points for registering friends, and can track how many people they've registered.

DATA AT A GLANCE

➔ Mobile Voter in San Francisco has determined benchmarks for recruiting mobile supporters at music concerts and events.

Assuming a strong and repeated announcement from the stage, organizers can expect:

➔ **10**% initial audience opt-in rate

➔ **75**% conversion rate to email or mail address

➔ **50**% follow-up for future actions

Other community-based organizations such as **Music for America** and **Oakland Vote** will be using similar tools to sign up concertgoers in their own voter registration efforts.

Rigby is optimistic that mobile phone campaigns that are part of voter registration campaigns will have a growing impact on electoral participation. For its pioneering efforts, Mobile Voter already won a 2006 Wireless Innovation Award from the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association (CTIA).

CANDIDATE AND POLITICAL PARTY SUPPORT

Mobile phones also bring tangible benefits to partisan campaigns of political candidates and parties as these explore ways to mobilize supporters and voters. Similar to other mass communications media, mobile phones allow for targeted messaging to supporters that have opted in to receive communiqués.

Furthermore, the viral nature of forwarding text messages has led to a "smart mob" effect, whereby political supporters keep each other informed of developments as they evolve in real-time.

As we saw earlier in the elections in Thailand and the Philippines, mobile phones can be a powerful tool in the hands of an organized force, intent on mobilizing their supporters.

The Spanish national election in 2004 featured grassroots political mobilization with text messaging and email resulting in confrontational demonstrations against the dominant political party in major Spanish capitals. Within hours after the dissemination of text messages, email and telephone calls, mass political protest rallies were staged in Barcelona, Madrid and other major cities across Spain.

This "flash mob" was so spontaneous and vast that the Spanish monarchy intervened in an attempt to calm the streets.

As recently as June 2006, supporters of a Referendum in Spain used mobile phones as a viral tool to spread the "Yes" vote. Catalans in Spain were being asked to vote by referendum on a proposal to give more autonomy to the Catalonia region.

Supporters of the referendum used mobile technology at mass rallies. At four rallies held before the referendum, a Bluetooth booth was set up for supporters to download videos, ringtones and images to their mobile phones to forward to their friends and family in support of passage of the referendum. Both of these examples showcase what is possible Using mobile phones in a vibrant political culture that already has a very high cell phone usage rate and pervasive text messaging. Young people are an active driver of this cultural evolution, spontaneously organizing youth meet-ups using email and SMS text messaging.

It is only a question of time before mobile phone campaigning reaches other major democracies such as the U.S. Joe Trippi, the pioneer of Internet political campaigning of Howard Dean's 2004 presidential bid, predicts that 2008 will be its breakout year in U.S. politics: "I think text messaging is going to be more important than ever. Look at the success of the pro-immigration campaign. We may be talking about the Great Text-Messaging Campaign of 2008, not the Great Blog Campaign."[2]

The obvious partisan political benefits are in fundraising, and the major U.S. political parties are hoping to lure $10 and $20 donations via text-messaging over cell phones, creating a new channel for private support of candidates for public office. We will be investigating the current state of mobile phone fundraising in an upcoming **Mobile**Active Strategy Guide, investigating past and current campaigns, and looking at the costs and effectiveness of SMS fundraising campaigns.

Both of these examples showcase what is possible using mobile phones in a vibrant political culture that already has a very high cell phone usage rate and pervasive text messaging. Young people are an active driver of this cultural evolution, spontaneously organizing youth meet-ups using email and SMS text messaging.

2: http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/12876663/site/newsweek/

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LESSONS LEARNED

Mobile phones are powerful tools for democratic participation and the growth of civil society. As we show above, mobile phones connect seamlessly with existing political strategies and movements, and reveal new techniques for mobilization, education, and engagement. Most of the lessons learned in this arena mirror those found in other applications of mobile phones:

1 Set goals.

Create a clear plan for how mobile phones will fit into your overall campaign, and how they will help you meet your organizing goals. Create specific objectives that you are trying to reach (reach x number of people, get x number of responses, etc.)

2 Understand your audience.

Create a profile of your audience so you can shape your messaging around them. Understand their use of mobile phones currently so you can set the right expectations about usage. Is your audience ready for a mobile phone campaign? If you're not sure, conduct a survey to learn more from them.

3 Create a budget.

Understand the costs of your project in terms of technology, people, and marketing. Know the factors that will affect your technology costs in the case of wide-scale adoption or unexpected success.

4 Get permission.

Use strict opt-in policies when building your mobile supporter list. Due to the personal nature of mobile phones, negative reaction to spam is higher than email and will result in being shut down by the mobile carriers. Furthermore, give your supporters ample opportunity to opt out or stop received your text messages at any time.

5 Have a clear call to action.

When using mobile messaging, make your campaign have a very specific and immediate call to action so that your appeal will be compelling enough to get people to act right a way.

6 Get creative.

Mobile is a new medium that is thirsty for innovation. To engage your supporters, be open to experimentation and trials to understand what works best.

7 Think big.

Take advantage of mass events where there is a high concentration of mobile phone users such as political rallies or music concerts. Provide training for your spokespeople so they are effective at delivering the call to action from the stage.

8 Tell a friend.

As many of our examples show, viral marketing plays a huge role in mobile phone outreach. Encourage your supporters to forward text messages to friends and family to build the "network effect."

9 Integrate your outreach.

Mobile phone communications should leverage other forms of constituency communications including print and online.