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M-Campaigning: Mobile Technology and Public Outreach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2008, candidate Barack Obama pioneered several innovative applications of digital technology. With the help of the Internet, he raised \$750 million. He made use of social media platforms such as Facebook and MySpace to identify and communicate with supporters around the country. And through Meetup.com, he launched virtual get-togethers with voters in many different locales simultaneously.



Reuters

Four years later, we see another wave of innovation enabled by mobile technology in the United States and around the world. Smartphones and handheld devices have proliferated and now outnumber desktop computers. Candidates, voters, activists, and reporters are using these vehicles for public outreach, fundraising, field organization, political persuasion, media coverage, and government accountability. Unlike 2008, where text messaging was the dominant feature of mobile campaign outreach, this year there has been a proliferation of mobile ads, video, web links, and apps.

As part of our Mobile Economy Project, I review innovative examples of campaign outreach made possible through mobile technology. I show how smartphones expand the opportunities for mobilization and ways in which certain policy steps would expand citizen participation.



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Public Outreach and Voter Engagement

The use of smartphones has risen dramatically in recent years. As pointed out in my recent paper, [“Ten Facts about Mobile Broadband,”](#) reliance on mobile broadband has increased much faster than fixed broadband. More than one-third of Americans own smartphones (up from 14 percent in 2008) and are using them to obtain a wide range of online information and services.¹ Not only is this the case in the United States, it is true around the world. Mobile has “gone global” and become a popular way to engage politically and access information about health care and education, among other issues.

According to Jumptap Founder Jorey Ramer, “consumers are spending 10 percent of their time with mobile media.”² They like the convenience, immediacy, and ability to personalize communications through handheld devices. Scott Goodstein, the CEO of Revolution Messaging, explained that “whether it is through in-app, MMS, a mobile landing page or a YouTube clip, the ability to watch a video through mobile makes a direct connection between candidates and voters.”³

With surveys indicating that 83 percent of smartphone and tablet users are registered to vote, it is no surprise that American candidates are using these devices to identify voters and recruit volunteers.⁴ In the 2010 elections, according to a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, “26 percent of Americans used their cell phones to connect to the elections.” Twelve percent indicated they used cell phones to keep up with the news, 10 percent sent election texts to friends and family members, 6 percent used their phones for information about voting places and conditions, 1 percent relied on mobile devices for election-related apps, and 1 percent contributed campaign money through text messaging.⁵

In 2012, candidates are reaching out through mobile apps, mobile advertising, and text messaging. For example, in the Republican presidential primaries, Newt Gingrich asked interested voters to text “Newt” to 59769 in order “to volunteer and get text updates on helping Newt win.”

Other candidates are developing mobile apps that take viewers to campaign websites. For example, President Obama’s campaign has an app that allows people “to access photos and videos, receive news updates and donate to the campaign.”⁶ Republican hopeful Mitt Romney also employs mobile apps to engage voters and attract supporters.

In the last presidential campaign, Obama famously announced his choice of Joe Biden as his vice-presidential nominee via text messaging to 2.9 million people who had opted-in to receive campaign messages.⁷ It was a way to reach large numbers of voters simultaneously and independently of the mainstream news media.

These outreach strategies are not limited to the United States. When you look globally, you see that mobile devices are being used in many places to engage voters. Candidates and political parties are bypassing traditional media and going directly to voters for political persuasion. In Germany, for example, the Berlin Green Party developed a mobile app that “allows supporters to discuss environmental issues

around the city and brings party billboards to life using Augmented Reality.”⁸ When pointed at a billboard, the app launches a mobile video message that discusses the environmental issue in greater depth.

In the United Kingdom, university students developed an app called “PoliticsDirect” that “locates the mobile user’s geographical location to find their local MP, MEPs, Councillors, Council and relevant information about them such as voting record and expenses.”⁹ This helps voters hold public officials accountable and improves the responsiveness of the electoral system.

Field Organization

Field organization is key in any election and candidates are using smartphones to identify likely voters and turn them out on election day. For example, in his 2010 Massachusetts Senate race, Scott Brown used smartphones with GPS to help field canvassers identify undecided voters. Workers could walk down each street, determine who was undecided based on canvassing calls, and knock on the doors or make phone calls to relevant individuals.¹⁰

This year, the Obama campaign allows volunteers to log into the Obama website with their Facebook account and get access to “any tool that you can get in a field office. You can have that at home, on your computer, in real time, in a way that connects to what your friends are doing and what the people around you are doing,” according to chief integration and innovation officer Michael Slaby.¹¹

This enables voter outreach because “people can now make calls, canvass, and be engaged on a deeper level from wherever they are,” Slaby said. By integrating mobile devices, tablets, and personal computers, campaign organizations make “it easier for volunteers to register new voters and call undecideds on the go.”¹²

Romney is following a similar approach. According to his digital director Zac Moffatt, “we’re going to have people watch one of our rich video units online, engage with our campaign, syndicate the message through social sharing, vote for us, and convince their friends to do the same.”¹³

In Haiti, where 75 percent have mobile phones, voters use these devices to “access information, confirm voter registration status and obtain information on the location of polling centers.” This has helped the country organize elections in the aftermath of its devastating earthquake.¹⁴

Public opinion research in the Czech Republic found that 55 percent of the country’s non-voters say they would cast a ballot if they could vote via mobile phones. This means that an extra 500,000 individuals say they would vote if they could do so through the convenience and ease of their personal cellphone.¹⁵

Advertising and Political Persuasion

With the growth of mobile usage, it is no surprise that political organizations have turned to online advertising as a way to persuade voters. For example, people who attended the Minnesota State Fair in 2010 and had a smartphone received targeted ads on their mobile devices from Michelle Bachmann's congressional campaign informing them that her opponent supported food tax increases. "I know it's state fair time and you don't want to hear about politics," the ad announced. "But while you're at the fair, you should know that Tarryl Clark here voted to raise taxes on your corn dog and your deep-fried bacon and your beer."¹⁶ The campaign was able to target this ad only on those individuals who were within a two-mile radius of the State Fair.

Geo-location features enable candidates to target ads geographically on specific events. For example, voters attending the Iowa caucuses this year got mobile ads targeted on caucus-goers. Candidates have the same capability for individuals who attend specific speeches or campaign rallies. "Campaigns want to reach voters where they are," indicated Rob Saliterman of Google Advertising. "And because of that, I think we'll see more [mobile advertising]."¹⁷

Voters have gotten "geo-targeted" mobile ads when they attended a Texas Rangers World Series game (sponsored by an Arlington, Texas congressional candidate endorsed by Rangers' owner Nolan Ryan), a NASA shuttle launch (sent by a Florida Senate candidate claiming incumbent Senator Bill Nelson supported ending the space program), or the University of Virginia (originated by Representative Tom Perriello hoping to mobilize the youth vote).

In South Carolina, Governor Rick Perry used mobile advertising to target nine Christian colleges in an effort to mobilize evangelical voters.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the Mitt Romney campaign employed Google's mobile search Adwords to engage voters. Using a "click-to-call" feature, viewers who searched for "Mitt Romney" would see an ad that allowed them to click through and call a Romney campaign office for more information.¹⁹

One of the reasons that candidates like mobile advertising is its highly targeted nature. Candidates can target zip codes, area codes, or other geographic areas. "Mobile apps create a 1 to 1 message directly to your user. It's like a personal conversation. You have the ability to control the worth of your mobile app user conversation. Mobile apps are quite engaging, and engagement is a key to business," said Cami Zimmer, the chief executive officer of Campaign Touch, a mobile communications firm.²⁰

According to Insight Express research, mobile campaigns are very effective at raising awareness. Its study found that "mobile Internet campaigns resulted in increases of nine percentage points for unaided awareness, nine percentage points for aided awareness and 24 percentage points for ad awareness."²¹

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Fundraising

A U.S. survey conducted by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project discovered that nine percent of Americans say they have used mobile phones to text \$10 of charitable contributions using the word "HAITI" to the phone number "90999."²² Following the Haiti earthquake in 2010, \$43 million was raised via text donations. For 74 percent of these donors, the Haiti campaign represented the first time they have made a charitable contribution through a mobile device and three-quarters of them did so on the "spur-of-the-moment" without undertaking much research.

After seeing how easy it was to contribute via smartphones, a number of donors made gifts to other disaster efforts. For example, people can give money to UNICEF by texting "FOOD" or to the International Rescue Committee by texting "AFRICA."²³ Overall, 40 percent said they had texted a gift after the 2011 Japanese tsunami and earthquake, 27 percent did so after the 2010 British Petroleum oil leak in the Gulf, and 18 percent gave a mobile gift to help those harmed by U.S. tornadoes during 2011.²⁴

However, federal candidates in the United States are forbidden from accepting political contributions via text messages. In a 2010 advisory ruling, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) rejected a request by The Wireless Association (CITA) to allow \$10 text contributions for federal candidates. Its rationale was that mobile texting would undermine finance disclosure rules if individuals could text contributions without having to provide their name, address, and occupation as required by federal law and that text contributing might allow foreigners or corporations to provide money illegally.²⁵

Additionally, since disclosure is required only for contributions more than \$200 and donors can anonymously provide donations up to \$50 a person, this policy decision was wrong-headed. The FEC should allow text donations of up to \$50. This would encourage small donors to participate in the finance system and provide a counterpart to the large amounts of money entering the political process from wealthy individuals and corporations. Current laws could be maintained because donors would have to agree that they were not foreigners or corporations.²⁶

Scott Goodstein has argued that wireless carriers need to reform their billing practices to make sure donors do not exceed the \$50 limit for anonymous political contributions and that they forward contributions within ten days, as required by federal law. Reliance on monthly billing cycles is not sufficient for political campaigns, he argued.²⁷

The Obama campaign is accepting campaign contributions through Square mobile credit card readers. This technology allows campaign workers to accept political donations from their iPhone or Android devices. Reliance on card readers will expedite the processing of contributions and enable field staff to raise money from contributors around the country.²⁸ The campaign developed a custom app that in conjunction with Square collects FEC required information such as address, occupation and employer.²⁹

Some national organizations have gotten around the FEC prohibition “by sending text messages with links to Web sites where political donations can be made.”³⁰ This allows voters to make gifts while also providing the required disclosure of personal information.

Others at the state level are seeking approval of text donations. For example, California and Maryland have approved legislation that would allow supporters to text contributions to political candidates.³¹ The California law did not limit contributions, but the Maryland legislation places a \$10 limit on political contributions, in accordance with the preferences of most wireless carriers. They limit the contribution amount because the gift gets added to the person’s monthly phone bill.³²

Other countries allow political party donations through mobile devices. In South Africa, for example, supporters can text contributions to the nine parties that have signed up for the service. However, the payment service provider charges five percent of the contribution to process the gift.³³ In the United Kingdom, there are mobile apps that allow people to make a political contribution by texting the party name, such as “GREEN.”³⁴

Media Coverage

Mobile technology is affecting how reporters cover politics. A variety of news organizations are deploying election apps designed to improve coverage and provide voters with the latest campaign news. For example, the *New York Times* launched its Election 2012 app in December 2011. It provides “news, polling data, candidate information and – when the time comes – live election results.” Not only does the app include *Times’* stories, it relies on coverage from other sites that editors deem to be important, such as from the *Economist* and *CQ Roll Call*.

Government Accountability

Mobile technology is a powerful tool for improving political accountability. Work by Charles Gibson and his colleagues at the University of California at San Diego demonstrates that cellphones have helped reduce electoral fraud theft in Uganda and Afghanistan. For example, people armed with cellphones monitored electoral processes in Afghanistan and reduced electoral fraud by 25 percent for politically connected individuals and 60 percent for the theft of ballot materials. In Uganda, where analysts studied 1,002 polling places, fraud was decreased by 26 percent when people using cellphones took pictures of posted local election tallies and sent them to a central clearinghouse.³⁵

Improvements in electoral accountability and fraud reduction also have been found through mobile monitoring in other countries. A study of the National Election Watch (NEW) in Sierra Leone found that the combination of citizen monitors and

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cellphone communications helped safeguard the electoral process. Observers sent codes via text messages to NEW headquarters, which then aggregated the results. Within 18 hours of poll closing, the organization announced that “despite minor discrepancies in certain districts, the elections had been well run by the election commission and voters had turned out in large numbers.”³⁶

Similar results were found in elections that took place in Indonesia, Palestine, and Montenegro. Electoral monitoring through cellphones improved the conduct of vote tabulation. Observers could see what was happening in various districts around each country, report quickly to a central headquarters, and identify places that had problems. The immediacy and real-time nature of the observation deterred bad behavior and helped to insure quality elections.³⁷

Conclusion

There has been an explosion of innovative uses of mobile technology in election campaigns around the globe focused on public outreach, fundraising, field organization, political persuasion, media coverage and government accountability. Candidates, parties, voters, and reporters are using smartphones and mobile devices for text messaging, mobile ads, video, web links, and apps. These features have enriched the civic discourse and provided new opportunities for public outreach and citizen engagement.

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