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Text-Friendly Hopefuls Vie For Hearts And Thumbs

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By Jose Antonio Vargas
Washington Post Staff Writer
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If Sen. Barack Obama is your guy, dial 62262 -- which spells "Obama" -- on your cellphone and text "Go." For supporters of Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, punch in 77007 and text "Join." Text "Today" to 30644 if you're a fan of former senator John Edwards.

A small but growing list of presidential candidates, all Democrats, are jumping on the text-messaging bandwagon. With more than three-quarters of Americans estimated to own cellphones -- and more than 15 billion text messages sent within the country each month -- campaigns believe it's a technology they can't afford not to exploit.

Aides for Obama (Ill.), the latest to launch a mobile campaign, say they'll use text messaging to organize events and urge supporters to donate money. Hours before Thursday's Democratic forum at Howard University, his campaign sent this message: "Debate tonight! Watch Barack Obama. . . ."

"Your cellphone is probably the one piece of technology that is with you all the time," said Joe Rospars, Obama's new-media director. He oversees the mobile campaign, which kicked off a few days ago. "The reality is, I don't think there's a campaign or a political organization right now that has figured out how to smartly use this technology. There's going to be a lot of experimentation."

With their foray into text messaging -- also known as SMS, for Short Message Service -- the campaigns are taking a cue from corporations and nonprofits, large and small, that have used text messaging to get their message to an increasingly mobile population.

Coca-Cola is using text messaging in its popular My Coke Rewards promotion. With cellphones ubiquitous on tool belts, union groups such as the Pacific Northwest Regional Council of Carpenters are texting to plan on-the-job-site rallies. And TV shows such as NBC's "Deal or No Deal" have copied the "American Idol" model, in which viewers used text messages to vote for their favorite contestants. The Mobile Marketing Association, which sets standards in cellphone advertising, said that about 30 percent of U.S. viewers used text messaging to participate in TV show "voting" in 2006.

It's not free, with prices varying from per-text charges to monthly subscriptions, and it took off around 2002, when U.S. cellphone companies made it cheaper and easier to send messages and TV shows such as Fox's "American Idol" asked viewers to vote by text.

"The way I think about it is, if we can support our 'American Idol' contestants by texting, why not our presidential candidates?" said Tim Chambers, co-founder of Media 50 Group, a start-up that focuses on the mobile political space. He is the co-author of a study called "Mobile Media in 21st Century Politics" for the New Politics Institute, a progressive think tank, and until last year was a senior vice president for Sony Pictures Digital and Sony Corporation of America. "The changes that we've seen and are seeing in the private sector have yet to truly catch fire in the political space," Chambers said.

There are already a handful of examples of American politicians using the technology: California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and former senator Rick Santorum (Pa.), both Republicans, used text messaging in their reelection campaigns. But the better examples are found overseas, in presidential elections in the Philippines, South Korea and Spain.

After the surprise outcome of the Spanish race in March 2004, when voters organized through text messaging

and voted out the governing Popular Party, the headline in the International Herald Tribune read "Cellphones May Have Tipped the Scales in Spanish Election: Text-Messaging the Revolution." The following week, a political cartoon featuring a group of election strategists showed a man in the middle saying "Nadie penso en mensajes SMS" ("Nobody thought about SMS messages").

Said Chambers, "When it comes to cellphones here in the U.S., all this potential energy is waiting to become kinetic energy."

So far the Democratic front-runners are using texting in varied ways.

Edwards, the first of the candidates to launch a mobile campaign, has sent texts urging his supporters to join his Young America program (text "Summer" to 30644) and sign a petition to end the war in Iraq (text "Iraq" to 30644). Last week, his campaign launched a fundraising drive that started off with a text message and was followed by a prerecorded phone call from Edwards himself: "Hi, this is John Edwards. Thank you for taking the time to respond to our text and listen to my message. . . ."

Clinton (N.Y.), who announced her mobile campaign in mid-May, has sent a couple of texts, one about her debate appearance and another urging supporters to vote for their favorite campaign song. Her campaign faced a little technical glitch at first. When Justin Oberman, a consultant in the field of marrying cellphones and politics, texted his Zip code to 70077, the reply he got was the address of a community clinic. The glitch has been fixed, said Peter Daou, Clinton's Internet director, and the campaign is working on getting a new short code.

Obama e-mailed his supporters about his mobile campaign and asked them to text "Strk" and their mailing address to get free Obama bumper stickers -- another way to update and build his mailing list. In addition, Obama is offering seven ring tones (his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention mixed with a hip-hop or rock beat, for example) and four cellphone wallpapers (two Obama photos and two Obama logos). Everything's free (text "ringtone1" and "image1" to get them), though standard texting rates apply.

Supporters can send their ring-tone and wallpaper ideas, and they can text questions about health care, for example, and get a response from a small group of volunteers and staffers. Within about an hour, if not a few minutes, a text such as "Iraq?" gets this response: ". . . Barack has been strongly against the war since 2002. Please visit www.barackobama.com/issues/iraq . . . 2 learn more."

Oberman, known as "the mobile guy" on TechPresident, the group blog that keeps track of how the candidates are using (and misusing) new media, has closely followed the mobile campaigns.

"Of the three, Obama has had the smoothest release of a mobile campaign so far. You can tell that his camp has really thought it through. Edwards, I think, has been the most innovative -- the 'stop the war in Iraq' petition, the prerecorded fundraising pitch. I'm a little disappointed with Clinton's," Oberman said. "A text-messaging campaign shouldn't be about telling me to go online and vote for a campaign song. It's about Clinton telling me to meet somewhere for a local Meetup event. It's about Clinton telling me to sign a petition. It's about something that takes into account my surroundings. Remember, my cellphone is with me everywhere, so what comes to my phone better be personal to me. Otherwise it's unnecessary."

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