

washingtonpost.com

## Politics' next step? Donations go high text

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The Associated Press  
Thursday, November 20, 2008; 1:27 PM

WASHINGTON -- In a 2008 Super Bowl ad, NFL golden boy Tom Brady asked nearly 100 million viewers to text "FIT" to donate \$5 to the United Way. About 25,000 people responded, raising \$10,000.

Now imagine if President-elect Barack Obama had been able to ask the 100,000 people who showed up at his rally in St. Louis in October to give \$5 or \$10 with a simple text. It's another technology political campaigns are eager to tap into as a new way to raise money.

Mobile giving is currently limited to nonpartisan, charitable organizations, such as the United Way, and politicians must clear a few technical and regulatory obstacles. But that could happen before the next presidential election.

"There's some things we'll have to work out for campaign finance, but I think in four years we'll have done that," said Jed Alpert, CEO of Mobile Commons, one of the five mobile application service providers that help organizations implement mobile giving.

Text messaging played a huge role in the 2008 election, largely due to the Obama campaign's aggressive use of mobile marketing. His success in reaching voters \_ particularly young Americans \_ is being praised and studied by politicians across the country. Soon it will be emulated.

"The Obama campaign will have the same effect on the future of mobile campaigning and giving that the declaration that the world was round had on the shipping industry," said Andrew Rasiej, co-founder of TechPresident, a bipartisan group blog that tracks online campaigning.

While the Obama model may revolutionize campaign tactics, it has not shifted one basic fundamental: money still rules. But, Obama proved that money can come in smaller amounts from a greater number of donors. In fact, Obama counted on more than 3 million contributors to amass his nearly \$650 million in total donations, about half contributing less than \$200.

That unprecedented level of small contributors demonstrated the potential for small text-message donations, Alpert said. The convenience of replying to a text to give money is a great way to reach young people. Nearly 10 percent of 18-to-29-year-olds reported contributing to a campaign this year.

That's significant because a survey found virtually no young donors in a national election in the 1990s, according to Peter Levine, director of the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, a nonpartisan group based at Tufts University.

"Allowing small, easy contributions helps young people tremendously to contribute," Levine said.

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Conservative campaign strategist David All said it would be a big mistake not to take advantage of this technology.

"Who would I wait for that opportunity?" said the 29-year-old All, who has been frustrated by the Republicans' slow adoption of mobile campaigning. "I remember going to Bush rallies and being so jazzed up in 2004, but it's not like I went home and wrote a check. But had I been there and had mobile and Bush said, 'You can chip in five or 10 bucks by texting blank to blank,' I would have done that in a minute."

But before Republicans or Democrats can text a donation to their favorite candidate, a few other parties must work out the logistics.

The carriers, the Federal Election Commission and the Federal Communications Commission have to sign off on any deal.

Nonprofit, nonpartisan organizations are able to use text messaging to raise money because wireless carriers agreed to waive a 50-percent fee they had charged for each online donation, which made it difficult to raise significant money.

The Mobile Giving Foundation, based in Bellevue, Wash., negotiated the fee waiver for nonprofits with the major carriers. So organizations now can pay a small service fee to the Mobile Giving Foundation, which facilitates the donations with the carrier. Donors then see the \$5 or \$10 contribution on their monthly wireless bill.

It's not clear whether carriers would be willing to waive that fee for political campaigns or if they might require some compensation, Alpert said.

"One of the issues will be who gets paid, how people get paid and what everyone gets paid," Alpert said. "But these are typically resolvable issues in all aspects of business and fundraising."

A spokesman with Sprint said he didn't imagine compensation would be a deal breaker but carriers would probably make that decision on a case-by-case basis.

The higher hurdle may be the reporting information the FEC requires with each donation. The campaign must record each donor's name, address and, if possible, employer as well as inform them of eligibility requirements, such as U.S. citizenship or lawful residence.

But assuming such detail could be collected, FEC spokesman Bob Biersack said text-messages donations could work in the same way online donations with credit cards worked this year.

Mobile Commons' Alpert predicted the regulators and companies interested in text-message campaign donations will start talks before the end of December.

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