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SMS messaging is becoming politically correct

South African political parties are increasingly turning to cellphones as a campaign tool in the run up to the 2009 South African national elections. Inspired by Barack Obama's 2008 US presidential campaign, some parties are exploring the use of SMS messaging and other mobile campaigns to compliment their online and offline electioneering.

Mobile reach in South Africa is said to be 90% of the total population. This is good news for political parties seeking to get their election messages out to all citizens. While the digital donga still limits access to the Internet for many South Africans, especially in poorer and rural areas, this is not the case with cellphones.

SMS messaging therefore provides the most easily deployed communications medium when using a service provider offering an SMS messaging solution. SMS does not require high-end handsets to access WAP or mobile Internet sites and, unlike MMS, SMS does not need to be set up. In addition to its potential reach as a messaging tool, SMS provides the most cost-effective campaign tool for political parties. The cost of sending a targeted message to party members far outweighs other mass media communication costs.

What are the political parties doing with mobile in 2009?

Some of the more prominent political parties in South Africa are using the mobile channel as a campaign tool for the 2009 elections.

Political parties are asking supporters to provide a cellphone number when joining as a party member. This allows parties to create an opt-in database of contacts. The party can then communicate with this supporter database in the run up to, as well as after, the election. The African National Congress (ANC) and the United Democratic Front (UDM) allow voters to subscribe to receive regular party news alerts to their cellphone. The UDM provides supporters with an option to receive an SMS reminder on when to cast their vote.

A major trend is the adoption of mobile donations. Many parties are using the POCiT Elect m-payment gateway for collecting contributions from supporters, including the Democratic Alliance (DA) and the African Christian Democratic Party who promote this donation line on their website. The Congress of the People (Cope) also advertises their mobile donation line on their website. Supporters can send an SMS to a premium rate number to make a once-off donation of R10 or R30 or they can choose to make a monthly contribution of R50. Both the DA and Cope promote their SMS donation lines on Facebook.

Other mobile political campaigning trends are: using SMS to pay membership fees (UDM), providing election officials' cellphone numbers on the party's website to encourage direct access to political leaders (ACDP and Cope), voters can send an SMS to alert a party to problems in their local community (UDM), encouraging the youth to submit their view via SMS (Independent Democrats (ID)), or driving party supporters to the SA Elections website to poll their vote by SMS'ing the party's abbreviation to a shortcode (DA).

More innovative mobile campaigns focusing on interaction and participation by citizens are also emerging. The ID has a ringtone of the party's campaign song available for download. The ANC, ACDP and DA have launched a dot mobi (.mobi) site that allows supporters to access party information and news

using the mobile Internet. The UDM has developed *UDMconnect* an SMS communication solution to send out reminders for rallies or updates on party matters as well receive SMS feedback from party members.

How SMS messaging can be used during the elections

From these local examples, SMS messaging is gaining traction as a political campaign tool, especially for communicating directly with party members to mobilise support or spread the party's political position on issues as well as a mechanism for collecting fees or donations.

There are also other applications of SMS messaging during the election period. In the build up to voter registration, citizens could check to see if they were registered to vote by SMS'ing their identity number to a shortcode advertised by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC). Cellphones also increase organisational reach and allow political parties to keep in touch with the election officials when they are in the campaign trail.

Citizens too can mobilise and use their cellphones to engage with political campaigning. Citizens could start a viral campaign by circulating SMS jokes or ringtones aimed at political leaders (as has happened in the Philippines). SMS messaging could provide a way of citizen election monitoring where election-related violence or intimidation can be reported directly to the media, a political party or an independent organisation such as the IEC or the Social Justice Coalition.

There is talk of the 2014 elections taking on mobile as a key campaign tool as political parties expand on, or even initiate, their online presence. While this will be an important step in digitising electioneering, it will require political parties to adopt a digital strategy that integrates SMS messaging and the mobile Internet into their Web and traditional media campaigns.

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About BulkSMS.com

BulkSMS.com, a division of Celerity Systems (Pty) Ltd, has been in operation since 2000 and is headquartered in Cape Town, South Africa. BulkSMS is a leading wireless application service provider offering bulk SMS messaging solutions to large and small businesses, public benefit organisations, and individuals. BulkSMS.com has a global market presence, including Europe, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. To further an organisation's SMS communication needs, BulkSMS offers two-way bulk SMS messaging, premium rate solutions and supports mobile marketing campaigns. BulkSMS flagship messaging solution is the BulkSMS Text Messenger, a desktop application. BulkSMS is a member of the Wireless Application Service Provider Association (WASPA).

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