

Donors can call on Gramm

Special numbers put contributions on phone bill

By Susan Feeney, Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- Political contributors first donated their money in cash and by check, then through credit cards and electronic bank drafts. Now, for Sen. Phil Gramm, they can go a high-tech step further by dialing in their dollars.

For his fund-raising dinner with President Bush in the Houston Astrodome on Dec. 7, the Texas Republican is using two 900-numbers to solicit dinner "sponsors." One number is for donating \$25, the other for \$50. On the other end of the line, a recorded message provides information about voter registration, absentee balloting and the dinner arrangements. Donors are billed for the contribution on their telephone bills.

"People are very busy," said Brad O'Leary, a supporter of Mr. Gramm's who is coordinating the effort, thought to be a political first. "It can be very difficult to give a political contribution. You have to write the check, know who to make it out to, know where to send it. It's a question of making it easier for people to participate."

As the Capitol Hill newspaper, Roll Call, put it: "Expect this to be big, very big."

On Wednesday, Mr. Gramm mailed more than 200,000 solicitations for dinner sponsors. About 10 percent of the letters included the 900-numbers in a test of the new tool's potency, according to Mr. O'Leary, president of Washington-based but Texas-founded P/M Consulting Corp.

It will be another month before the responses of the standard solicitations can be compared with the newfangled ones, Mr. O'Leary said, but he is optimistic.

"I think this is probably the newest technology in fund-raising that's come along in a long time," he said. "It lets you use something that's familiar to everybody -- the telephone -- something they trust."

Various 900-numbers have been in commercial use for several years, especially for measuring public opinion. And Mr. O'Leary was one of the first to tie it to

politics in April, when he helped the National Rifle Association use a 900-number to mobilize members with respect to legislation pending in Congress.

That project raised nearly \$2.5 million at \$5.59 a call.

For acting as collection agency, the telephone company gets a small percentage of the haul. In the case of Mr. Gramm -- who is up for re-election in 1990 -- Mr. O'Leary would not disclose how much money MCI Telecommunications Corp. is receiving, but he said it is "very little."

So far, the Federal Election Commission, which oversees campaign finance matters, is skeptical about the new fund-raising practice. It is expected to weigh a host of questions about legal safeguards, including ensuring that contributions do not come from businesses -- which would be illegal -- and that telephone donations are not used to skirt contribution limits.