

April 16, 2018

**Summary Report on NOVA results in the 2017 Cuyahoga County General Election. Effect of vote-by-mail on turnout of low income and student voters, new findings on flawed registrations, and other studies of voting in populations served by NOVA. (Full report available at [www.NOVA-Ohio.org/research](http://www.NOVA-Ohio.org/research))**

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**Research population:** Between May and October 10, 2017 NOVA volunteers registered 650 voters, signed up an additional 660 voters for vote-by-mail (VBM), and obtained both VBM and registrations for 274 clients prior to the November 2017 General Election. The following report does not include data on non-Cuyahoga County applications received by NOVA volunteers nor applications without population information, nor does it include turnout data on invalid VBM applications.

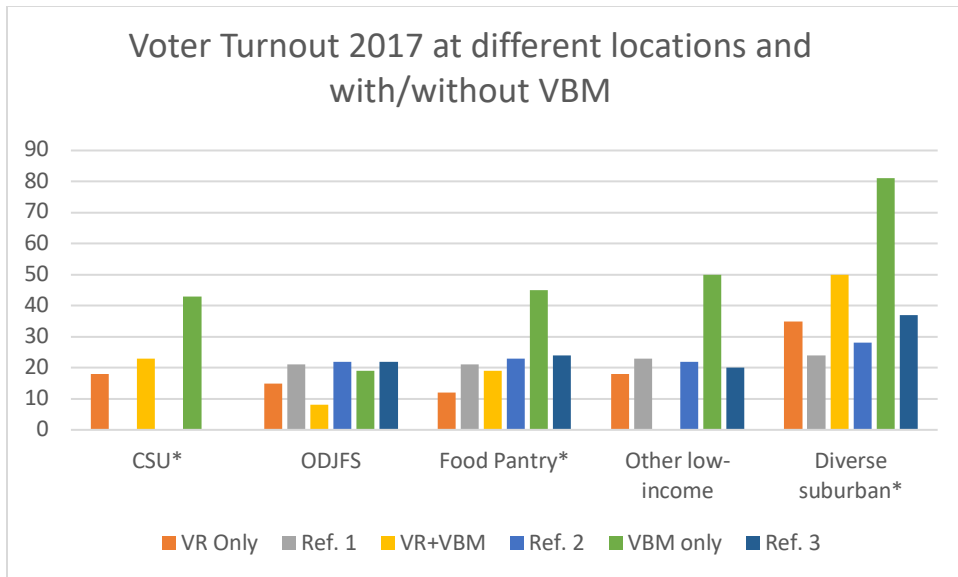
**Summary & discussion:**

**Vote-by-mail signup of registered voters by volunteers increased turnout.** In the 2017 general election in Cuyahoga County, turnout of the city of Cleveland, which has generally served as a proxy for low-income voter turnout, was 23%. Turnout of voters simply registered by NOVA was in the same range. However, when NOVA volunteers signed up self-described “already registered” voters for vote-by-mail, total turnout (i.e. votes cast by mail and in-person, as a percent of all those signed up for VBM) doubled in many of the populations NOVA serves (Figure 1). This turnout-enhancing effect of VBM application was seen in some low income populations (but not at the Jobs & Family Services office), as well as in Cleveland State University students and “diverse suburban residents” of Cleveland Heights (Figure 1). A similar pattern was observed in NOVA’s voter populations in the 2016 general election<sup>2</sup>, although because of the higher baseline turnout in the Presidential election, the increase due to VBM was less striking (up to 14 percentage points). Furthermore, the personal touch of volunteers appeared to make a huge difference in turnout outcome: former VBM voters signed up by NOVA in 2016, when sent a completed VBM application for 2017 (requiring only their signature) and a stamped- addressed envelope to the BOE, did not increase their turnout over those who received no mailings, whose turnout (in the 23%+/- 5% range) was similar to that of NOVA-registered or Cleveland voters (Figure 2).

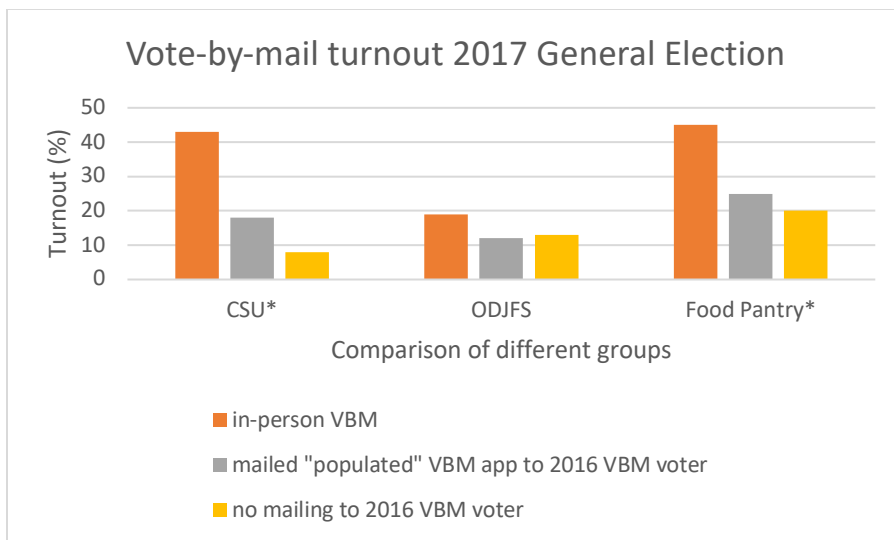
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<sup>1</sup> The data matching kindly done by Justin Alcorn, and analysis of data by NOVA Board member Nora Kancelbaum are gratefully acknowledged.

<sup>2</sup> “Lessons Learned From NOVA Volunteer Efforts to Improve Voter Registration, Vote by Mail and Turnout in 2016 (July 5, 2017).” Available at [NOVA-Ohio.org/research/](http://NOVA-Ohio.org/research/)



**Figure 1.** Explanation: **1.** Locations: CSU = Cleveland State University; ODJFS = Cuyahoga County main office of Ohio Dept. Of Jobs & Family Services; “Other low-income” = New Day in Hough, In the Neighborhood, Harbor Light Salvation Army, Harvard Community Center, etc.; “Diverse Suburban” = Zagara’s supermarket and main library in Cleveland Heights. **2.** NOVA signups: “VR Only” = clients signed up only for voter registration (including updates of address) but not for VBM; VR + VBM= clients signed up for BOTH voter registration and VBM; and “VBM only” = already registered voters who signed up for VBM. **3.** Statistics: \* means that VBM result was significantly greater than VR alone or VR+VBM or “Ref.” (Reference group: the expected turnout based on the precinct turnout of the same voters (see footnote 2. for Method). In the “Other low-income” group, this result was apparent by eye but numbers were too small for statistical validation. **4.** Turnout numbers also include voters who signed up for VBM but then voted in-person. This was a small fraction of VBM voters.



**d** **Figure 2.** Effect of in-person sign-up for VBM on turnout

**VBM applications** obtained by NOVA volunteers from many self-described “registered” voters were in fact invalid mostly because their addresses were not updated with the BOE or secondarily because they were not registered. Either of these deficits would also have negatively affected voters’ attempts to vote in-person. The percent of invalid VBM applications differed greatly between low income (15-21%), CSU students (13%), and suburban (<1%) groups. This finding demonstrates why volunteers must check the registration address and status of all voters in the groups at risk of impaired registration status. **In addition, the large percentage of flawed VBM applications in the low-income**

groups reflects a broader community problem: extrapolation of these results (see detailed findings) leads to the estimate that at least 40,000 low income Cuyahoga County residents are currently registered with either an outdated address or are not registered at all, and yet are under the impression that their registration is valid. When attempting to vote, these voters would face possible confusion, added difficulty, and/or loss of vote. Invalid registrations could also account for many of the numerous provisional ballots cast in Cuyahoga County, which require extra poll official and BOE staff time. **Further extrapolation indicates that some 132,000 low-income voters in Ohio's 6 largest counties may well have invalid registrations.**

**Gender-related turnout was sometimes but not always the same as had been found in the 2016 election.** Increased VBM voting by women (compared to men) in 2017 was, as in 2016, found at food pantries and other low-income locations but in contrast to 2016, was not observed at CSU or ODJFS.

**At the Cuyahoga County Jail, hardly any voters issued a VBM ballot used it to vote, whereas turnout of those choosing to vote in jail was 44% for both voters from Cleveland and from other cities in Cuyahoga County.** The turnout of vote-at-jail voters was statistically increased compared to Cleveland residents, but the analogous results of inmates from elsewhere in Cuyahoga County (where general turnout had been 33%) were not.

**Recommendations for NOVA and other registration groups, based on these findings:**

1. Encouraging defined already-registered low-income and college student populations to vote-by-mail (VBM) resulted in substantially increased voter turnout compared to registration alone. Therefore, this should become an important focus for registration drives in these populations, provided that registrars check every voter's registration status (see next item). VBM assistance to voters after the deadline for voter registration did not increase turnout (similar to results in 2016), and might be discontinued.
2. NOVA and other registration groups should initiate a "check to see that your voter registration is OK" campaign as part of their registration programs in low-income and student populations, because in 2017, 15-21% of self-stated low-income and 13% of student "registered voters" were either registered at an old address or not registered at all.
3. Based on its findings and census data (See complete report for analysis) NOVA estimates that at least 40,000 low-income Cuyahoga County residents, contrary to their belief, have either not updated their voting address or are not registered at all. Thus, a campaign targeted to low-income communities (and in the long run, statewide automatic voter registration) is needed to correct these serious problems which disproportionately impede voting in low-income and student populations.
4. NOVA should continue to offer registration and VBM signup to newly registering low-income voters, since it may make the difference between voting and not voting, even though the turnout is low.
5. Voting in jail had a high turnout rate, and therefore inmates should be encouraged to receive their ballots in the jail. However, volunteers need to explain the possible need to vote a provisional ballot, as well as alternatives to VBM, such as early in-person voting and voting on Election Day, for inmates who believe they will be released in the near future.
6. Prepopulated mailed VBM applications are not cost- and time-effective.
7. The marked boost in turnout resulting from in-person encouragement to vote-by-mail, suggests that if NOVA could maintain a personal connection with its voters between elections, it might increase their turnout.