

New research from Cuyahoga County: Providing vote-by-mail increased turnout of low-income voters in 2015 by about 25%

Adding Vote-by-mail encouragement and assistance in filing applications to voter registration campaigns could yield 20,000-40,000 additional votes from low-income people in Cuyahoga County in 2016 by increasing turnout. Vote-by-mail was greatly underutilized by this population in 2012.

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Norman Robbins, Research Director NOVA with the assistance of Nora Kancelbaum, NOVA Board

SUMMARY:

During the voter registration drive prior to the November 2015 election, in addition to traditional voter registration, NOVA volunteers encouraged on-the-spot vote-by-mail (VBM) applications to already registered voters at sites frequented by low-income voters. The turnout (per cent of registered voters who actually voted) of those registered without VBM was essentially the same (28%) as the turnout of the precincts from which the voters came (“the reference turnout”). However, the turnout of already registered voters who were assisted in filing and submitting VBM applications was 55% compared to 28% turnout of their reference precincts -- a statistically highly significant difference. In addition, in a small number of cases, 50% of voters supplied with both registration and VBM assistance, turned out to vote in contrast to 25% turnout in the reference group. The results of this pilot project were so pronounced and statistically significant, that we recommend that VBM assistance to low-income voters be added to all voter registration campaigns in the run-up to the 2016 General Election. This is especially warranted because Absentee voting was underutilized in 2016 by voters in Cleveland (22% of votes cast) vs. 31% in the rest of the County, despite the mailing of vote-by-mail applications to all registered voters. The effect of VBM on turnout was not observed in CSU student populations.

With several assumptions, we project that an emphasis on VBM application during voter registration drives might lead to 25-40,000 additional low-income votes cast in Cuyahoga County in the 2016 General Election.

DESCRIPTION OF STUDY: Prior to Cuyahoga County’s November 2015 Ohio General Election, NOVA volunteers, at four sites frequented by a total of 200 low-income people (average household income \$20,885)¹, registered and/or helped voters fill out and process vote-by-mail (VBM) applications (NOVA also registered over 1100 individuals at other sites of a different character). These registrations or VBM applications were later matched (by State Voices) against the state data base to see how many had voted in November 2015. About 82% of registrations only and nearly 100% of vote-by-mail applicants were matched successfully. The data were subdivided according to the site at which NOVA volunteers contacted voters, and at each site, the “turnout” of successfully matched voters was calculated, taken as the number voting as a percentage of those serviced. Next, the turnout of NOVA-contacted voters was compared to the “reference” turnout of all voters from the same precincts. Finally, the data from the 4 sites were pooled for statistical analysis (See Appendix for Methods).

RESULTS: Fig.1 gives the turnout of each of the four low-income populations serviced by NOVA, in three categories: 1) those who were already registered BUT were provided with assistance filling out

¹ Using the most frequent zip codes comprising 80% of the matched study population, and data from zipwho.com, the weighted median household income was \$20,885.

VBM applications, which were then submitted to the Board of Elections; 2) those who were provided only voter registration and 3) the weighted “reference” turnout of the same precincts of the VBM or registration groups (i.e. the voting pattern of the precincts in which the voters contacted by NOVA were living).

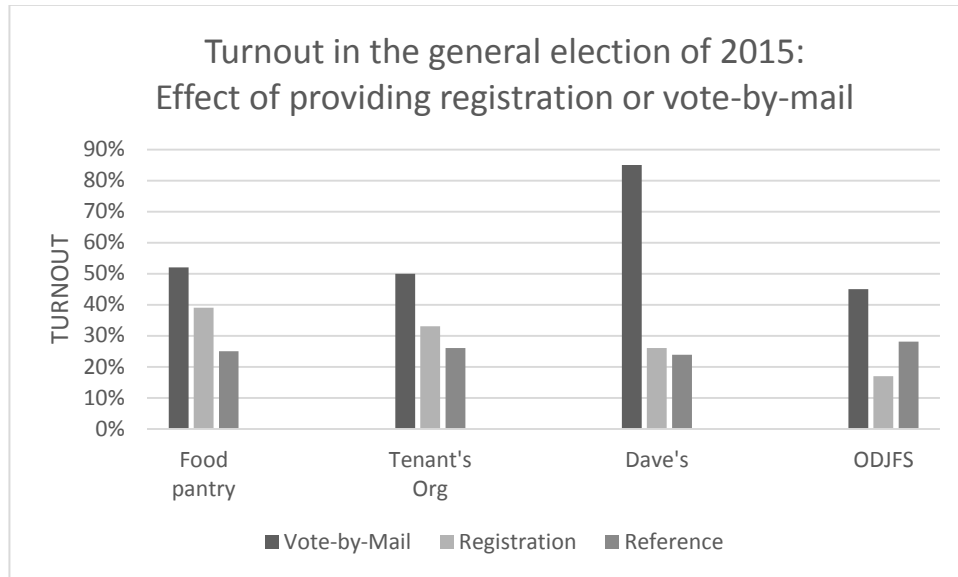


Fig. 1. “Food pantries” are widespread Cleveland area institutions providing food for low-income individuals; the sites of registration by the Cleveland Tenant’s organization were Rockefeller Tower and St. Timothy Manor; “Dave’s” is Dave’s super market on Payne Ave. and “ODJFS” is Ohio Dept. of Jobs & Family Services at 615 Superior Avenue.

A consistent pattern emerged at all 4 low-income sites (Fig. 1), namely that voters provided with VBM assistance turned out in considerably higher percentages than did voters provided with just voter registration. Also, those provided only with voter registration often turned out to vote at a rate close to that of the reference population from the same precincts.

In order to gain numbers sufficient for statistical analysis, data from the four low-income registration sites (Food pantry, Tenant’s Organization, Dave’s super market, and ODJFS) were pooled, with the results in Table 1 and Figure 2.

Group	Number of voters	Turnout with NOVA service	Turnout of reference precincts
Vote-by-Mail only*	71	55%	28%
Vote-by-Mail & voter registration	14	50%	25%
Registration only	98	28%	26%

Table 1. *=difference between turnout of vote-by-mail and reference group significant at p=.001

Although the numbers of participants were relatively small, the results were clear. **The turnout resulting from voter registration alone (28%) was essentially the same as that of the reference population (26%). However, the turnout from already registered voters provided with VBM assistance and processing was a remarkable 55%, which was a highly significant statistical difference from that of the**

reference population. Finally, the small group provided with both VBM and voter registration gave a similar result to the group provided with VBM only, but the numbers were too small for statistical analysis. (See Methods for detailed discussion and qualifications)

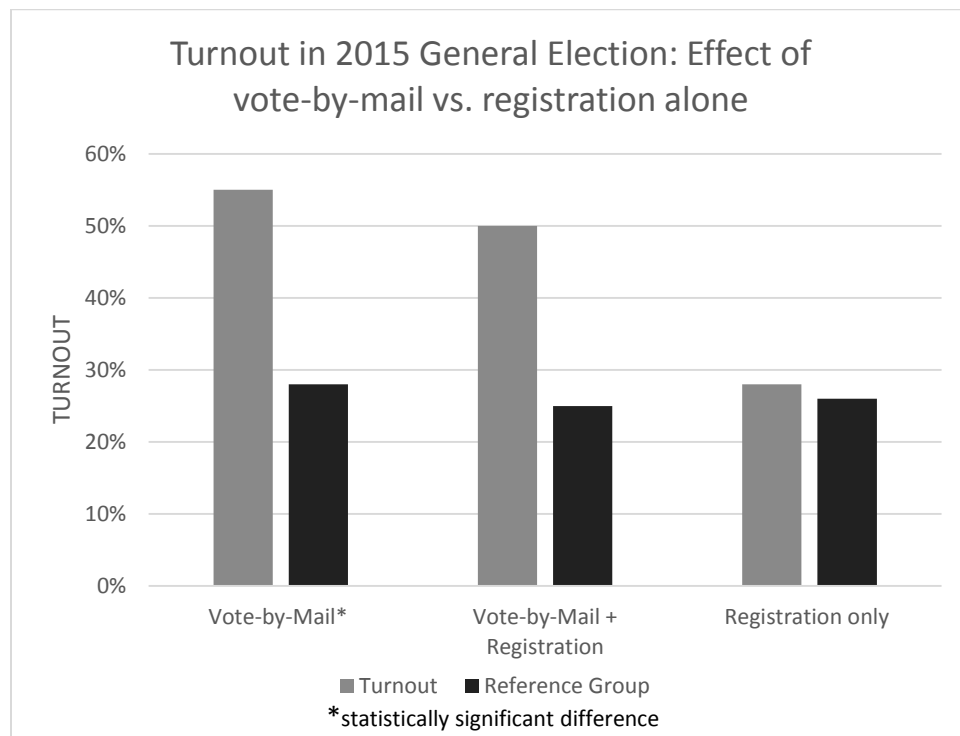


Figure. 2

ADDITIONAL FINDINGS:

Possibility of bias in selection of VBM voters.

The possibility of difference in racial composition (% African-American) in the various groups displayed in Figure 2 was investigated². In all these groups, the racial composition was essentially the same (around 70% African-American), i.e. there was no greater preference for VBM or for voting in the low-income African Americans than in low-income whites. In addition, a majority of the voters in this study (63%) were from Cleveland precincts, and the remainder from elsewhere in the County.

Also, those who elect to complete a VBM application, when offered it or encouraged by our volunteers, may be a self-selected group that is willing to give VBM a try. In fact, there was a small but significantly greater turnout in the reference precincts of those who did vote by mail (31% turnout) vs. those who submitted a VBM application but ended up not voting (25% turnout). In other words, a small part of the success of VBM offering was based on a higher “pre-existing propensity to vote” among those who did finally vote by mail. However, for purposes of statistical comparison, we used the combined turnout of the VBM reference group.

^{2 2} Estimates were made using the voters’ address and geocoding by Mark Salling, Cleveland State University. Estimates were made by assigning the probability of race/ethnicity to participants based on the proportions of race/ethnicity of their residential census block in the 2010 Census.

Does Cleveland underuse VBM compared to the rest of Cuyahoga County

Given that 30% of Cuyahoga County adults live in Cleveland, and 70% in the rest of the County³, and knowing that Absentee votes in 2016 were 22% of votes cast in Cleveland and 28% in the County as a whole⁴, it was calculated that Absentee voting in Cuyahoga County excluding Cleveland was 31% of votes cast. In other words, usage of Absentee voting in Cleveland, a relatively poor part of the County (Median Household Income \$26,000, with 60% African Americans) was far less than that in the rest of the county (Median household income \$44,000, with 30% African Americans)². This was found even though the Board of Elections category, “Absentee votes”, includes both VBM and early-in-person voting. The latter is utilized disproportionately by African-American and low-income persons, and therefore would be higher in the city of Cleveland⁵. In sum, VBM is used far less in a place where the turnout of its low-income population could be greatly increased by the use of VBM.

Application to other demographic groups.

For reasons unknown, turnout of Cleveland State University students was about equally increased over the reference group (turnout 14% in 18-28 year old registered voters) in both those offered registration only (turnout 32%) and those offered VBM (27%). In this student group, a peculiar result was that registration alone significantly increased turnout (The VBM results had too few numbers for statistical comparison). The point is that different demographic groups may respond differently to registration with or without VBM.

SUMMARY/DISCUSSION:

The large increase in turnout by voters provided with VBM assistance makes sense when one considers that of all valid applications for vote-by-mail ballots received by the Cuyahoga Board of Elections in 2015, there was a 90% return of completed absentee ballots (including early-in-person “absentee” ballots). In addition, this low-income population, if Cleveland is typical, historically underutilized VBM in 2016 (see Results) so that encouragement by volunteers is important. Thus, by enhancing the chances of voters getting and completing a ballot by mail, NOVA volunteers were in effect helping to transfer low-income voters from a low turnout (e.g. 28%) to a high-turnout (e.g. 90%) category. Indeed, only some 21% of Cleveland voters voted Absentee (VBM or early in-person) in 2012 even though all registered voters were mailed a VBM application. Therefore, offering VBM during registration campaigns will still address the needs of the majority of the population encountered. Furthermore, volunteer registrars can do what the mass mailing of VBM applications cannot: encourage the use of VBM by touting the multiple benefits of VBM –no conflict with work or child-care schedules, plenty of time to complete a lengthy or complex ballot, and voting requiring only a signature and the last 4 digits of their social security number (especially if they lack a Driver’s license). However, VBM voters need to be alerted to common mistakes that disqualify VBM ballots – mostly sending in the ballot too late, failing to return ID

³<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/3916000>;

<http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/39035,3916000>

⁴ Data from Cuyahoga Board of Elections website

⁵<http://1001.nccdn.net//000/000/1a6/358/Racial-and-ethnic-proportions-of-early-in-person-voting.pdf>;

<http://1001.nccdn.net//000/000/1a5/f50/Analysis-of-Median-Household-Income-Differences-between-Election-Day-VBM-and.pdf>

envelope, or omitting a signature. One way of reducing such disqualifications would be for registration groups to include preventive warnings about these mistakes in GOTV telephone or e-mail messages to voters that filed VBM applications. Also, homeless voters are better off voting early-in-person because of frequent change of address.

What is the significance of this pilot study for the 2016 election? A number of calculations and assumptions are necessary to estimate the answer to this question. First, about 60% of Cleveland's population has a "low" household income less than \$35,000 per year⁶, so we assume that 60% of all voters registered in Cleveland (290,000 in 2015) or about 174,000 (.6 x 290,000) are at issue. In 2012, voter turnout for Cleveland was 59%, so that 71,000 low-income voters did not vote. If voter registration campaigns in 2016 reached half of these 2012 non-voters, i.e. half of 71,000= 36,000 voters, and if VBM were offered and produced a 25% increment in turnout as seen in 2015, then in a Presidential year, their turnout might have reached 59% + 25% =84%, or an additional 30,000 votes in 2016. If the same approach was taken to perhaps a similar number of low-income voters living elsewhere in Cuyahoga County, then several thousand more votes might be obtained if VBM were part of their registration contact. The same would also be true of unregistered voters contacted by registration campaigns. Even if some of the assumptions are too optimistic, a figure of 25,000 extra votes if VBM were routinely offered and encouraged, is possible.

Taking a totally different approach to this estimate, one can tally the total number of voter registrations submitted to the Cuyahoga Board of Election in 2012 (per the 2012 NVRA report) by non-profit and third-party organizations -- approximately 62,000. If instead of voter registration alone, these and additional already-registered voters (say a third more, as in our experience) had been offered VBM application assistance, and if the per cent of returned ballots were even higher because it was a Presidential election, turnout might have been increased by perhaps 44,000 votes (based on the present study). **The main point is that voter drives which stress VBM applications for both registered and newly registering voters will probably garner far higher turnout than those which offer registration only.**

APPENDIX

Methods:

Turnout. All voter registrations and vote-by-mail forms obtained by NOVA volunteers were scanned and transcribed on to an Excel file that also preserved for each voter the location where contact with NOVA volunteers occurred. Next, these voter records were matched by State Voices against state records of voters and voting activity in the November 2015 election. For each site, the number who were matched and voted was divided by the total number matched in the group, to give turnout (expressed as a percentage).

Statistics. Comparisons between groups of voting/not-voting data were made using chi-square tests of 2x2 contingency tables. For each group (e.g. VBM provided to registered voters), the observed numbers

⁶ <http://factfinder.census.gov/faces/tableservices/jsf/pages/productview.xhtml?src=bkmk>

of voters and non-voters was compared to the expected numbers found in the reference groups. A Mann-Whitney test was used to test the difference in turnout of voters and non-voters in the respective reference precincts.

Reference group. For purposes of comparison of the turnout of a given group (e.g. already registered voters provided with VBM assistance) with that of the home precincts of the voters, the turnout of the reference or control group was calculated by first listing the precinct of each voter in the matched list. So, for instance, there were 28 matched voters whom NOVA volunteers registered at food pantries, and a list was made of the precinct of each of these 28 voters (including cases where 2 or more voters were from the same precinct, in which event the same precinct appeared two or more times in the list). Then for each voter on the list, the turnout of that voter's home precinct in the 2015 election was determined and made into a second list. The average turnout of the precincts on this second list was determined, and taken to be the "reference" turnout for that registration site. Thus, in the case of the food pantries, 28 turnout numbers were determined, one for each voter's precinct, and the average of these was taken as the reference turnout for the 28 food pantry voters.

Acknowledgements:

This report represents a joint effort of many volunteers, who deserve sincere thanks. First, it would not have been possible without the diligence and efforts of NOVA volunteers, who took extra time to offer voters vote-by-mail assistance and to pick up and deliver the forms and reports from each site they serviced. In addition, then NOVA Board member Barbara Megery collected, collated, scanned, and classified data so that it could be transferred to a data base by Cathy Johnson of COHHIO, and her intern. Next, Angela Tombazzi, then data analyst for State Voices, carried out the matching between our voter lists and the state election records of those who did and did not vote. Mark Salling, Director, Northern Ohio Data and Information Service, Levin College, CSU, provided geocoding to determine racial proportions of voters in this study. Lastly, NOVA board member Nora Kancelbaum combined the matched data of our voters with precinct data on turnout.