



Making Voter Registration Easier: Evaluation of the “Welcome Kit” Voter Registration Pilot Project

R. Michael Alvarez*
Thad E. Hall#
Morgan H. Llewellyn⁺

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CHAPTER 10

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Contact Information:
admin@votingtechnologyproject.org

* Professor of Political Science and Co-Director Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, California Institute of Technology.

Associate Professor of Political Science, Department of Political Science, University of Utah.

+ Assistant Professor, Institute for Advanced Studies, Lucca; previously Postdoctoral Scholar, California Institute of Technology.

Chapter 10: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

This evaluation of the Welcome Kit pilot program has considered how it affected the registration process along several dimensions. Specifically, we considered:

- The distribution of Welcome Kits and the costs associated with this project (Chapter 4);
- Who participated in the Welcome Kit Program (Chapter 5);
- How Welcome Kit participants compared to recent movers in Ohio (Chapter 6);
- How Welcome Kit participants compared to other registered voters in Ohio (Chapter 7);
- Whether there was evidence that the Welcome Kit pilot project had a discernable effect on registration and turnout rates (Chapter 8); and
- How the Welcome Kit program did or did not affect the voter registration process at the state and local levels (Chapter 9).

In this chapter, we make a series of recommendations and observations about the pilot and make commentary regarding how such a pilot could be evaluated more effectively in the future.

Significant Results from the Evaluation Study

Some of the key statistics from our study include:

- 712,690 Welcome Kit packets with voter registration forms were distributed in the three postal markets during the pilot project.
- 304,750 Welcome Kit packets with voter registration forms were distributed in the Cleveland market, 215,528 in the Columbus market, and 192,412 in the Cincinnati market.
- 35,015 voter registration forms were returned to election officials in Ohio and Kentucky: 34,126 in Ohio and 889 in Kentucky.
- We estimate a cost per returned voter registration form of \$4.22.

More generally, we found:

- The pilot was comparatively low cost. Determining the cost per registrant for any voter registration program is difficult to ascertain. However, we have been able to find several comparable metrics for the cost of registering voters that we can use to evaluate the Welcome Kit program. We find that the cost per registered voter for this program was in line with the costs of other registration modes.
- The pilot appears most effective in the context of an election contest. Individuals appear more likely, generally, to register to vote using the Welcome Kit (and using

most other methods) during the height of an election campaign, when the voter is most focused on the potential benefits of voting and the need to register is high (since failing to register by a specific time may lead to a potential voter to be ineligible to vote in many jurisdictions).

- The pilot saw a lower response rate in the Cincinnati market. In Chapter 4 we discuss a number of reasons for this, but our inference is that the lower response rate is primarily a result of the shorter amount of time between the Cincinnati project inception and the 2008 election coupled with the hypothesis that the voter registration form used in the Cincinnati market might have been more confusing.
- The Welcome Kit program was most effective in registering more affluent movers. The Welcome Kit participants tended to be better educated, older, and have a higher income than did other new residents in Ohio in 2008. However, it is also the case that registrants and voters tend to have these high socio-economic status attributes compared to the population as a whole.
- Welcome Kit participants encountered problems with their registration statuses. On Election Day, Welcome Kit participants were significantly more likely to report a problem with their registration status relative to Longtime Registrants.
- The Welcome Kit program tended to be most effective in registering individuals who had been registered prior to moving. The individuals in the Welcome Kit program were more likely to be registered previously than other newly registered individuals; over 50% of Welcome Kit participants' voter history files indicate voting in the 2004 November election.
- Relative to other subpopulations of registered voters, Welcome Kit participants are more significantly likely to vote by mail. Welcome Kit participants were approximately 4 and 10 points more likely to vote by mail relative to Other New Registrants and Longtime Registrants, respectively.
- Compared to other voters who registered at the same time, Welcome Kit participants tended to be older, better educated, have higher incomes, and more likely to be White. In particular, relative to participation in the Welcome Kit program we find much higher levels of registration by college-aged individuals among Other New Registrants (individuals who registered at the same time as the Welcome Kit program but by other means).
- The Welcome Kit program did not add to the burden of registering new voters in the local election offices in Ohio. Local election offices input the data for all new and updated registrations, and conduct any research related to these records (such as evaluating eligibility). The Welcome Kit program did not affect this process.
- The Welcome Kit program had an uncertain effect on registration and turnout in the implementation areas. This pilot project was implemented in a non-experimental way; due to a variety of implementation constraints that we discussed in Chapter 3 the pilot project's treatment (provision of a voter registration form in a Welcome Kit) was not randomized. Thus, inferences about the effects of the pilot program on registration and turnout levels in the implementation markets are only observational, and subject to some uncertainty. There is some evidence indicating that the Welcome Kit pilot program may have led to increased registration and

turnout in the implementation areas, though that evidence is weak and is not necessarily robust.

Key Recommendations from the Pilot Project

- As our evaluation indicates that this was a comparatively low cost means to register voters, our recommendation is that this approach to providing voter registration materials be replicated in other areas in future elections.
- However, in future implementations, we recommend that the most appropriate time for provision of voter registration forms be studied, and in particular studying whether providing voter registration forms in Welcome Kit packets within the 4-6 month period before the state registration deadline prior to a major election is more effective than providing forms during other periods of the election cycle.
- We recommend that any voter registration forms used in future implementations of similar projects be redesigned to conform to the design principles we discussed in Chapter 4. We also recommend that additional research be conducted to set standards for user-friendly voter registration forms.
- We suggest that future implementations of efforts like this study what the optimal number of forms to distribute in Welcome Kit packages might be, and perhaps also study how it might be possible to better target the number of forms to particular households or geographic areas.
- A highly effective and efficient means of registering individuals who move and complete the Official Change of Address form *online* could be to have a national or state-specific voter registration form available for online access or completion. The form could be printed and mailed to the appropriate election office, or in states with online means of voter registration, the form could be completed using the state's voter registration system. We recommend further study and perhaps pilot testing of such voter registration procedures.¹
- Implementations of efforts similar to this should be designed to study the registration and turnout effects experimentally, so that future evaluation efforts can develop better estimates of the registration and turnout effects than we were able to produce with our observational study.
- Additional research into a number of related topics is necessary. In particular, we believe that research efforts are needed to better understand the costs associated with voter registration efforts, both by election officials and by third-party registration efforts. Also, additional research on the how voter registration materials are distributed to potential voters is necessary, in particular regarding how different populations do or do not take advantage of different registration options.

¹ Additional discussion of possible new voter registration procedures for Ohio has recently been made by Wendy R. Weiser, J. Adam Skaggs, Christopher Ponoroff and Lawrence D. Norden, "Modernizing Ohio's System for Registering Voters: Automatic & Online Registration", November 5, 2009 (http://www.brennancenter.org/content/resource/ohio_blueprint/).