



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

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INTRODUCTION

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Executive Summary

The “Make Voter Registration Easier” (MVRE) pilot project, in the field from February 2008 through May 2009, provided voter registration forms in the “Welcome Kit” packages that were sent to households that changed their address in three postal markets: Columbus, Cleveland, and Cincinnati. The first two markets are exclusively in Ohio and the Cincinnati market includes households in Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. This report provides a thorough quantitative and qualitative evaluation of this pilot project, with detailed analyses provided in subsequent chapters.

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.

These results, and others that we discuss later in this report, lead to some general conclusions:

- The pilot was comparatively low cost. Determining the cost per registrant for any voter registration program is difficult. 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 (\$4.22) compares favorably with available data about registration costs from other studies.
- 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. When we compare the Welcome Kit participants in Ohio to the population of other movers in Ohio in 2008 (some of whom did not register to vote), we see that Welcome Kit participants tended to be better educated, older, and have a higher

income. However, it is also the case that registrants and voters tend to have these higher socio-economic status attributes compared to the population as a whole.

- The Welcome Kit program was used by more affluent registrants when compared with all new registrants. When we compare Welcome Kit participants to those who registered at the same time, Welcome Kit participants tended to be older, better educated, have higher incomes, and were 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).
- Welcome Kit participants encountered problems with their registration status. 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 were more likely to vote by mail. Welcome Kit participants were approximately 4 and 10 percentage points more likely to vote by mail relative to Other New Registrants and Longtime Registrants, respectively.
- 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 discuss 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

Based on these primary results, we have the following recommendations:

- 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 with the design principles we discuss 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 investigate the optimal number of forms to include in Welcome Kit packages.
- 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 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.

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. In Chapter 1 we give a short introduction to this report, and in Chapter 2 we discuss the general motivation for the pilot project and provide some background research review. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the pilot project, and there we discuss the research questions that motivated our evaluation effort, as well as the data and analyses that we conducted. The next chapter turns to an analysis of the distribution of Welcome Kit packages with voter registration forms, the return of voter registration forms in Ohio and Kentucky, and a discussion of program cost. Chapters 5-7 examine a variety of different perspectives on who the pilot project reached, looking in particular at various socioeconomic, demographic, and behavioral data to document the groups that might have taken advantage of the forms in the Welcome Kit packet to register to vote. In Chapter 8 we examine the potential effects

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/).

that the pilot project had on voter registration and turnout rates; Chapter 9 studies the effects of the pilot project on local election officials. Chapter 10 concludes our evaluation report. Also included within this report are four Appendices, which provide detailed information about the project (Appendix 1, which contains copies of the voter registration forms used), and about the methodologies used in our evaluation project (Appendix 2 discusses details of our telephone survey of registered voters, Appendix 3 provides greater discussion of the matching methodology we use in Chapter 8, and Appendix 4 presents information regarding our local election official survey that is used in the analysis presented in Chapter 9).

Table of Contents

Chapters:

Chapter 1:	<i>Introduction</i>	9
Chapter 2:	<i>Project Rationale and Description</i>	12
Chapter 3:	<i>Research Questions and Evaluation Methodology</i>	19
Chapter 4:	<i>Distribution of Registration Forms in Welcome Kits and Responses</i>	27
Chapter 5:.....	<i>Description of Welcome Kit Participants</i>	47
Chapter 6:.....	<i>Comparing Ohio Welcome Packet Participants with New Residents</i>	55
Chapter 7....	<i>Ohio Welcome Kit Participants Compared to Ohio Registered Voter Subpopulations</i>	62
Chapter 8:.....	<i>Registration and Turnout Effects of the Welcome Kit Pilot Project</i>	71
Chapter 9:.....	<i>The Welcome Kit Pilot Project and Local Election Officials</i>	85
Chapter 10:	<i>Conclusions and Recommendations</i>	106

Report Appendices:

Appendix 1:	<i>Ohio and Tristate Voter Registration Forms</i>	112
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**Appendix 2:Survey Methodology
..... 116**

Appendix 3: . *Estimating Registration and Turnout Effects of the Welcome Kit Pilot*

**Project
..... 141**

**Appendix 4:*Survey of Local Election Officials in Kentucky and Ohio*
..... 157**

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