



Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges

Final Report

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We also thank the Overseas Vote Foundation for assistance in recruitment efforts.

Last but certainly not least, thank you to the many service men and women and overseas voters who participated in our research project and offered invaluable insights and feedback that form the heart of this report.

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Executive Summary



Research Scope and Key Findings

Previous research has found that Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters experience a higher rate of vote failure than non-UOCAVA voters. While FVAP has gone to great lengths to improve its services and meet its goal of ensuring UOCAVA voters can cast a ballot as easily as non-UOCAVA absentee voters, vote failure¹ continues to occur, and the underlying reasons for this failure remain elusive. That is the puzzle this research seeks to address—what are the causes of UOCAVA vote failure, and how might these barriers be reduced or eliminated? The research results presented here represent a significant step toward understanding the factors that facilitate UOCAVA voting success as well as the challenges that inhibit it.

The overall goal of this project is to address two objectives:

1. Obtain an analysis of the processes employed by all strata of UOCAVA voters for potential deficiencies, risks, and pitfalls which serve as barriers to voting success.
2. Obtain an assessment that identifies social and behavioral factors that influence UOCAVA voters.

This qualitative research consisted of a series of ethnographies, focus groups, and in-depth interviews, through which we examined each stage of the absentee voting process – 1) Motivation and First Steps; 2) Registration; 3) Requesting and Receiving the Ballot; 4) Filling Out the Ballot; 5) Sending the Ballot; and 6) Confirmation – in order to pinpoint the factors that make the greatest difference between success and failure. These factors are summarized below and explored in detail in the main body of the report.

The audience under study included:

- **Active duty military voters**
- **Family members of military personnel**
- **Overseas federal government employees**
- **Overseas civilian voters**
- **Actors that help and assist UOCAVA voters including:**
 - Voting Assistance Officers (formal and organic)
 - Local Election Officials
 - Military leaders

¹For the purposes of this report, vote failure refers to instances in which an eligible voter attempts to vote but ultimately does not cast a ballot or casts a ballot that does not count.

Summary of Key Findings

1. Motivation and First Steps

Timely “Triggers.” Unlike other Americans who, once registered, can essentially ignore the voting process until the day of the election, Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters must plan for voting well in advance of the actual election, sometimes several months in advance. Essential to their success is experiencing a “trigger” early enough that motivates them to begin the process in the first place. Voters overseas (both military outside of the continental United States (OCONUS) and civilian UOCAVA voters) often feel more disconnected from U.S. elections and sometimes lack information about the candidates and campaigns. Thus, the “triggers” voters in the U.S. experience often do not reach overseas voters with sufficient lead-time, and voters either begin the process after registration deadlines have passed, or too late for the ballot to be received and sent back in time to be counted. Sometimes they forget to vote altogether. Triggers are most important for younger and first-time voters.

Visible Resources. Because the absentee voting experience is constantly evolving—whether due to changes in personal circumstances or changes in the process itself—it can be difficult for voters to form consistent habits that help them vote successfully in the future. (Following a series of steps that worked in one election may not guarantee success in another election.) For this reason, knowing that there are resources to help with the voting process, and knowing where to find them, are paramount to voting success. But there is significant variation in the visibility and accessibility of the Voting Assistance Program depending on the installation or location. Military family members are often dependent on the active duty service member for access to and knowledge of these resources. Yet, there was low to no awareness among military personnel about whether their spouses and dependents could vote through the same process that they use. For civilian voters, organic Voting Assistance Officers (VAOs), such as peers, Human Resources managers, and study abroad leaders remain an untapped resource. Some evidence also indicates that existing resources could be improved and modified to better fit the needs of each UOCAVA population.

Encouragement and Support. Significant variation also exists in the efforts of different actors involved in the voting process. In the military, these differences are often related to the culture of the installation, including how important voting is to the base commander and other military leaders. There is a “trickle down” effect in that support from the commander influences the efforts of the Installation Voting Assistance Officer (IVAO), and in turn, the VAOs. Simply put, if the commander believes voting is important, it becomes important on his or her base. In addition, most military VAO programs have a high turnover rate. VAOs are appointed for a limited period of time, which means few VAOs or IVAOs experience more than one election in their positions.

In effect, the people responsible for helping voters—like many of the voters themselves—are often starting from scratch, with little institutional knowledge or infrastructure on which to draw. The turnover effect is less of a problem on the civilian side, where local election staff at U.S. embassies often retain their positions for several years, and are able to develop an expertise on the voting process. However, although embassies report significant outreach efforts to overseas voters, this communication does not seem to be penetrating, and civilian voters do not often look to the embassy for voting support, preferring to rely on organic VAOs or their own initiative. In fact, civilians are largely unaware of Department of State VAOs. Local Election Officials are also a key part of this process and local election offices vary widely in ability and commitment to serving UOCAVA voters.

2. Registration

Jurisdiction and Deadlines. A key barrier for some UOCAVA voters is uncertainty about which state or county to register in. Because of the mobile nature of their jobs, service members and government employees are especially prone to confusion about their proper voting jurisdiction. Civilian voters who have lived outside of the U.S. for long periods of times are also confused, and many are resistant to registering at their last place of residence if they no longer have a connection to that jurisdiction.

Ambiguity around registration deadlines is also a barrier to casting a ballot. Many VAOs on both the civilian and military sides report that this is one of the most common questions they receive from voters. However, because it is impractical for VAOs to become experts on the rules in every state, it is difficult for them to guide voters through their state-specific issues.

Confirmation. Some voters also report being uncertain about whether their registration actually was received and processed correctly. Voters who can easily check and confirm their registration status (whether permanent or absentee registration) are more likely to be successful in subsequent stages of the voting process.

3. Requesting and Receiving the Ballot

Timing. The primary barrier to requesting a ballot is simply not knowing when to do so. Voters often request their ballot too late, which is particularly problematic for voters overseas who are then hampered by mail delays. Mail delays are an acute problem among OCONUS personnel, and significantly less so among CONUS voters.

Awareness and Usage of the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA). Many voters remain unaware of the FPCA as well as the fact that registration and requesting a ballot can occur with the same form. (Most voters reported contacting their Local Election Official directly to obtain their ballot.) On some military installations, however, VAOs make FPCAs readily available at voting tables or booths around election time, using the distribution and collection of FPCAs as the main “trigger” to begin the voting process. Civilian voters are far less likely to recognize the FPCA or report using it, and express antipathy toward the form itself, comparing it to a convoluted tax form.

Online requests. While actors who help UOCAVA voters report that the ability to receive the ballot online is one of the most significant improvements in the UOCAVA voting process, many voters remain unaware of the ability to receive their ballots online. To be sure, receiving a ballot online is not a panacea, as some voters (mostly older) worry that they would miss the e-mail containing the ballot information.

4. Filling Out and Sending the Ballot

Errors on the Ballot. While vote failures most often trace back to breakdowns in the steps around the actual ballot completion, Local Election Officials and VAOs do note that voters occasionally make errors on the ballots themselves – most commonly failing to sign the affidavit or envelope. When these errors occur, especially among overseas voters, reaching the voter in time to correct the error is difficult. Voters, meanwhile, report few problems when it comes to filling out the ballot. Here lies a disconnect that needs to be addressed: voters are unknowingly making errors on their ballots that are then causing vote failure. Even though LEOs may assume that providing directions to voters is enough to prevent errors, experience reveals that many voters are not absorbing these directions and may need them to be communicated repeatedly and in more streamlined ways.

Regarding the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB): even though it is available as a backup for those who do not receive a ballot on time, many voters and even the actors who help voters are not very familiar with this form. Among voters who had experience with the FWAB, many found it confusing, and some simply gave up and failed to cast a ballot. Other voters who were shown the form expressed reservations about using it and pointed to several deficiencies. Many voters noted that a lot of research would need to be conducted to properly fill out the ballot, and this discouraged them from using the FWAB. Local Election Officials also report high error rates among voters who use the FWAB.

Mail delays and trust. Mail delays are cited by a number of actors as a major cause of vote failure among UOCAVA voters. In fact, the very notion that mail delays occur or that mail systems are unreliable serve as demotivating factors that sometimes discourage UOCAVA voters from sending their ballots in. Distrust of mail systems is a major barrier and is more likely to occur among civilian voters in certain parts of the world. However, some military personnel and their families are also hampered by the locations of their APO boxes, some of which are located far from where they live or in locations that they may not frequent.

Sending online. Many voters and actors who help UOCAVA voters are eager for the opportunity to cast ballots online. Some express concerns about security, but most believe that the risks are minimal and could be inoculated against if a system were designed properly, citing examples such as online banking.

Misinformation. In addition, certain myths surround this part of the voting process that also act as barriers. In the military, many voters believe that either their ballot won't count once it arrives, or that it will not actually make it to its destination. This perception is exaggerated among OCONUS voters who feel more disconnected from the U.S. and find it hard to believe that their ballot will make it all the way back home and will actually be counted. On the civilian side, many DOS VAOs report that U.S. citizens often believe incorrectly that they can come to the embassy to drop off their ballot or actually vote on Election Day.

5. Processing and Confirmation

Processing and Counting Ballots. LEOs report little or no difficulty in processing and counting UOCAVA ballots that are received on time. The systems in place for securing and counting ballots appear to be working well. However, some ballots are rejected due to missing signatures or other errors, and voters are often not informed of these problems with their ballots, which could easily lead to the same errors and vote failures being repeated in the next election.

Closing the Loop. Many voters, and those who assist them, emphasized the importance of being able to confirm with their local election office that a ballot was received. Some LEOs are doing this already, but this is the exception rather than the norm. Conversely, not receiving confirmation, and the perception that there is no means of doing so, fuels cynicism among UOCAVA voters and dissuades them from completing (or attempting) the process. In fact, receiving a confirmation is the universal number one recommendation among UOCAVA voters.

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Methodology



Lake Research Partners conducted 52 ethnographies with members of the U.S. military, 16 among overseas federal employees of the U.S. government, 38 among overseas civilians, 40 among Local Election Officials, and 21 among family members of active duty service members. We also conducted 11 focus groups among members of the U.S. military, 11 among overseas civilian voters, 2 among UOCAVA-eligible overseas civilians, and 10 among military spouses and dependents.

Additionally, LRP conducted 71 in-depth telephone interviews with actors involved in the voting process, including: military leaders, Installation Voting Assistance Officers (IVAOs), military Voting Assistance Officers (VAOs), Department of State Voting Assistance Officers, Local Election Officials, academic experts, and “organic” VAOs (non-governmental organizations, human resource managers, and study abroad leaders). Qualitative research findings are not meant to be generalized to larger populations nor assigned statistical significance. The segmentation and demographic characteristics of each category of examination are as follows:

Segmentation of Military Research

Interview format	Installation (location)	Branch	Number of Ethnographies/Groups
Ethnographies	Jacksonville, Florida	Navy	6
	Mildenhall, UK	USAF	3
	Lakenheath, UK	USAF	3
	EUCOM, Germany	Army*	3
	Stuttgart, Germany	Army*	4
	Aviano, Italy	USAF	5
	Fort Bragg, North Carolina	Army	6
	Camp Lejeune, North Carolina	Marines*	8
	Yokosuka, Japan	Navy	10
Focus Groups (In Person)	Minot AFB	USAF	1
	Camp Pendleton	Marines	1
	Naval Station Norfolk	Navy	1
	Okinawa, Japan	Marines*	1
Focus Groups (Online)	[online - geographic mix]	USAF	1 CONUS, 1 OCONUS
		Marines	1 CONUS
		Navy	1 CONUS, 1 OCONUS
		Army	1 OCONUS, 1 CONUS/OCONUS

*Some participants at starred locations were members of other branches of service. At Camp Lejeune, Navy members were embedded with Marines.

Military Participants by Demographics

	LRP STUDY - N size	LRP STUDY - %	OVERALL MILITARY ²
TOTAL	110		
OCONUS	48	44%	14%
CONUS	62	56%	86%
Army	18	16%	39%
Navy	34	31%	22%
Marines	14	13%	14%
Air Force	43	39%	23%
Not ascertained	1	1%	
Men	82	75%	86%
Women	28	25%	14%
White	71	65%	70%
Non-white	31	28%	30%
Refused/Not ascertained	8	7%	
Enlisted	69	63%	83%
Officer	33	30%	17%
Not ascertained	8	7%	
Under 30	25	23%	66%
30 and over	66	60%	34%
Refused/Not ascertained	19	17%	

The demographics of the participants included in this research do not match the overall military population. Because our goal was to explore barriers to UOCAVA voting success, we conducted more research among overseas participants, since this is where vote failure or challenges are most likely to occur. Military OCONUS voters have a different demographic make-up compared to CONUS military voters, which are reflected above.

As detailed below, recruitment of military participants varied from installation to installation, and, in many cases, we used a convenience sample. Although the resulting selection of participants was non-random, every effort was made to recruit diverse participants who reflected the range of UOCAVA voter demographics and experiences. As qualitative research, this study is not intended to draw generalizable conclusions, but rather to yield insights from in-depth exploration of UOCAVA voting experiences.

²Source: Federal Voting Assistance Program. 2012 Post-Election Voting Survey of Active Duty Military

Segmentation of Military Family Research

Interview format	Installation (location)	Number of Ethnographies/Groups
Ethnographies	Lakenheath, UK	3
	Fort Campbell, KY	5
	Stuttgart, Germany	5
	Fort Lewis, WA	5
	Norfolk, VA	3
Focus Groups (In Person)	Lakenheath, UK	1
	Stuttgart, Germany	1
	Norfolk, VA	1
	Minot, ND	1
Focus Groups (Online)	[online - geographic mix]	6 OCONUS/CONUS

Military Spouse Ethnographies and Focus Groups by Demographics

	LRP STUDY- N size	LRP STUDY- %
Total	92	
Men	12	13%
Women	80	87%
White	65	71%
Non-white	26	28%
Refused/Not ascertained	1	1%
Under 50	77	84%
50 and Over	15	16%
Less than 4-year college degree	30	33%
4-year college degree or more	62	67%
Students	2	2%
Teachers/Professors	1	1%
Artists/Writers	2	2%
Science/Medicine	10	11%
Business/Finance	10	11%
Technology	5	5%
Engineers	1	1%
Unemployed/Homemaker	38	41%
Retired	2	2%
Other	21	22%

Segmentation of Civilian Research

Interview format	Location	Number of Ethnographies/Groups
Ethnographies	Toronto, Canada	2
	London, England	2
	Mexico City, Mexico	2
	San Jose, Costa Rica	4
	Madrid, Spain	3
	Istanbul, Turkey	3
	Manila, Philippines	1
	Buenos Aires, Argentina	3
	Tel Aviv, Israel	4
	Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	3
	Hong Kong, China	3
	Singapore City, Singapore	4
	Cape Town, South Africa	4
Focus Groups (In Person)	Toronto, Canada	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	Paris, France	2 - 1 Voted; 1 UOCAVA-eligible
	Mexico City, Mexico	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	Istanbul, Turkey	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	Tel Aviv, Israel	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	Singapore City, Singapore	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
	London, England	1 - Voted or attempted to vote
Focus Groups (Online)	Australia	2 - 1 Voted; 1 UOCAVA-eligible
	Germany	1 - Voted
	Europe	1 - UOCAVA-eligible

Civilian Ethnographies and Focus Groups by Demographics

	LRP STUDY- N size	LRP STUDY- %
Total	138	
Men	57	41%
Women	81	59%
White	100	72%
Non-white	34	25%
Refused/Not Ascertained	4	3%
Under 50	72	52%
50 and over	66	48%
Less than 4-year college degree	17	12%
4-year college degree or more	121	88%
Students	9	7%
Teachers/Professors	25	18%
Artists/Writers	14	10%
Science/Medicine	9	7%
Business/Finance	22	16%
Technology	7	5%
Engineers	1	1%
Unemployed/Homemaker	10	7%
Retired	14	10%
Other	27	20%

Federal Employee Ethnographies

Location	Agencies represented	Number of ethnographies
Sydney, Australia	1	3
Canberra, Australia	1	2
Pretoria, South Africa	3	6
Bogota, Colombia	3	5

Local Election Official Ethnographies

Two ethnographies were conducted with LEOs in each of the following locations:

- Crestview, FL
- District of Columbia
- Las Vegas, NV
- Atlanta, GA
- Renton, WA
- Milwaukee, WI
- Cleveland, OH
- Houston, TX
- Indianapolis, IN
- Grantsville, WV
- Boise, ID
- Los Angeles, CA
- Fairfax, VA
- Brooklyn, NY
- Baton Rouge, LA
- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Anchorage, AK
- New Haven, CT
- Bossier, LA

Table: In-depth Interviews by Type

Total	71
Military leaders	20
Military VAOs	10
Department of State VAOs	18
Local Election Officials	8
Academics	4
Organic VAOs Total	11
Study abroad leaders	2
NGOs	5
HR managers	2
Peace Corps/USAID	2

Initial Selection of Sampling Frames

Our overall selection goal was to reach a mix of UOCAVA voters and actors that assist UOCAVA voters that are broadly representative of each population.

The UOCAVA voter population includes military service members stationed in the United States as well as service members stationed abroad. We chose a mix of CONUS and OCONUS installations and within those, a mix of installations that varied by service branch and geographical location. For federal employees, we aimed to choose a variety of geographic locations that employed moderately high numbers of U.S. federal employees. The installations chosen to study military family members vary by service branch and geographic location. We chose a mix of CONUS and OCONUS locations (as well as online groups) in order to gather perspectives and understand the differences in the voting experience of military family members stationed in the U.S. compared to abroad.

The locations chosen to study Local Election Officials represent the geographical diversity of UOCAVA voters' voting jurisdictions, but also a mix of high and low vote failure rates among UOCAVA voters. The counties with low failure rates represent the exemplars of processes that work to ensure that UOCAVA votes are counted while counties with high failure rates can help us ascertain what about the county's processes might be contributing to vote failure.

The location stratification scheme for the civilian ethnographies and focus groups is designed to capture the range of overseas locations where eligible American voters are working and living. Respondents comprised a mix of Americans who are overseas for a variety of reasons, including work, study, and personal reasons.

Recruiting Process

Ethnographies among Military Members

In order to recruit participants for the military ethnographies, FVAP pulled a random sample of service members at each target installation. FVAP then issued e-mail invitations for service members to a survey link to answer the screening questions. Participants were active duty service members who were registered to vote in the 2012 election, voted or attempted to vote via the military absentee voting process, and had never served as a Voting Assistance Officer. We excluded VAOs from the ethnographies in order to capture the experience of the typical military voter; VAOs have much more knowledge and expertise about the voting process, and their perspectives may not represent the average service member.³

Once participants passed the initial screening criteria, our recruiters followed up with a phone call to administer the remaining screener questions⁴ and invite them to participate in the ethnography. Participants were given a general description of the project purpose and received up to three confirmation e-mails and/or calls to remind them of their appointment.

For some installations, e-mail sample was either unavailable or included outdated contact information. This problem particularly affected recruitment at Fort Bragg (where no sample was available) and to a lesser extent, at Aviano. At Fort Bragg, we relied exclusively on Voting Assistance Officers to send out the e-mail invitation to their units. This strategy was somewhat successful, but in order to reach our target, we also recruited participants in-person at the Solider Support Center, a high-traffic central area of the base. Participants were administered screening questions and then invited to come back at a later time or the next day for the ethnography.

For the Aviano recruit, we also relied on VAOs to increase awareness of the study taking place and asked them to send the e-mail invitation out to their units in order to encourage participation.

³ However, we did conduct an ethnography with one former VAO at Fort Bragg. We chose to not exclude this participant because her service as a VAO occurred years earlier when she was stationed at another installation. Thus, her perspective as a voter stationed at Fort Bragg was more like that of an average voter than a VAO.

⁴ Information collected included: education level, rank, age range, and voting jurisdiction. This information was collected for statistical purposes.

We have no reason to believe that the source of the invitation (FVAP vs. VAOs) systematically affected the recruitment. That is, participants who were recruited via invitations from VAOs versus FVAP are not systematically different from each other in ways that would have affected our results. However, respondents who were recruited in-person at Fort Bragg may be different from the respondents recruited via e-mail. The respondents recruited via e-mail invitations may have been more committed to the overall process and more interested and experienced in voting. They also may have had more time to reflect on their voting experience in 2012 and recall the steps they took to complete the process. Respondents recruited in-person may have been less interested in the voting process, less engaged, and less enthusiastic to share their experiences. In fact, the show rate for respondents recruited in-person was low compared to respondents recruited via e-mail, suggesting that the interest level of respondents recruited via e-mail was much higher. However, considering only three total respondents were recruited in-person, the impact of their responses on the results are modest and were taken into consideration in the analysis of findings.

Focus Groups among Military Members

Our methods of recruiting for our in-person and online military focus groups similarly relied on e-mails from FVAP and POCs at installations, inviting service members to participate in the study. The recruitment criteria were identical to those used for the military ethnographies: all focus group participants were enlisted service members who had voted or attempted to vote absentee in 2012.

Ethnographies among Federal Employees

We also conducted 16 ethnographies among U.S. federal employees in Sydney and Canberra, Australia, Pretoria, South Africa, and Bogota, Colombia. Because a random sample of e-mail addresses for federal employees located overseas was unavailable, we relied on contacts made at the embassies in each location to assist in recruiting. Our contacts (mostly staff in the Community Liaison Offices) sent an e-mail invitation to all federal employees located in each target location. Potential respondents were instructed to respond to the e-mail with their availability and best contact information. Our recruiter then followed up with each respondent to administer the remaining screening questions and secure the interview appointment. Our researchers also recruited in-person at the embassies.

Researchers attempted to seek respondents who worked at a variety of federal agencies and were cognizant of making the in-person recruitment as random as possible. Part of this was accomplished by approaching every third person in centrally-located areas, like the embassy lobby and cafeteria. Although we were likely not able to reach the universe of U.S. federal employees who work in these overseas locations, we learned that most, if not all, federal employees in these locations either work at the embassy or have regular contact with embassy offices. Since recruitment occurred through the embassies (either through e-mail invitations issued by embassy staff or physical recruitment on-site), we are confident that the recruitment remained as unbiased as possible and reflects the broader population of overseas federal employees.

Ethnographies and Focus Groups among Military Family Members

We conducted 21 ethnographies and 9 focus groups among dependents of enlisted service members. At some installations, such as RAF Lakenheath, Minot AFB, and JBLM we received assistance from contacts on base, who helped disseminate e-mail invitations to participate, and postings on spouse Facebook group pages. For some locations, we also advertised the opportunity to participate in the study on local news websites and on Craigslist. Our online groups were recruited primarily through a professional focus group recruiting company, whose database includes military spouses. Finally, where recruiting proved to be especially difficult, we also used a referral process, inviting recruited participants to lead us to other potential participants who might qualify for the study.

Although respondents were not randomly drawn from a sample (since no comprehensive list was available), they did represent a range of backgrounds and experiences. Given the geographical diversity and multiple recruiting methods used to enlist participants, we are confident that the recruitment remained as unbiased as possible and reflects the broader population of military spouses.

Ethnographies and Focus Groups among Overseas Civilians

Since no comprehensive database of overseas voters exists, we used a variety of recruitment methods to reach out to and invite overseas civilian voters to participate in this study. Numerous organizations that serve overseas populations (Overseas Vote Foundation, etc.) agreed to send e-mail invitations out over their e-mail lists, and we also sent e-mail invitations to voters identified as overseas residents in the Catalist voter database. In addition, we posted invitations to participate on Craigslist and other local websites. Where recruitment proved more difficult, we did additional outreach to locally based organizations that serve expatriates, such as American schools abroad; in some cases, contacts at these organizations also shared invitations to participate with their networks.

No definitive data exists summarizing the characteristics of the full overseas voting population, but based on the variety of geographic areas selected for this study and the demographic range of our participants, we feel that the overseas voters interviewed for this study are a reasonably representative cross-section of the overseas civilian voter population.

Ethnographies among Local Election Officials

After preselecting a list of local election offices designed to capture the geographical diversity and varying vote failure rates of local election offices serving UOCAVA voters, we made direct contact with each office on our list, and asked to speak to those in the office most directly involved in assisting UOCAVA voters. We found LEOs to be very receptive to our invitations and had little difficulty scheduling two ethnographies in each of the offices we contacted. In a few cases where our contacts were unavailable or declined to participate, we selected replacement location to hit our target of 40 total ethnographies with Local Election Officials.

In-depth Interviews

Local Election Officials: We recruited 9 Local Election Officials to participate in in-depth interviews. We selected a mix of counties that included counties with high UOCAVA ballot success rates as well as counties with high failure rates. Contact information for each office was provided by FVAP. The contact person at each county was contacted by phone and/or e-mail and invited to participate in a phone interview. The purpose of the study was explained and we also verified that the person we were speaking to was indeed the person responsible for overseeing the administration and processing of overseas ballots.

Military Leaders: FVAP provided a list of points of contact at each target installation. In many cases, the points of contacts were the IVAOs. POCs were e-mailed a request for the contact information of the installation or base commander. Once that information was provided, we contacted the commander or the commander's assistant to request an interview. At some installations, we interviewed the Vice Commander or Deputy when the Installation Commander was unavailable. For the purposes of this report, we identify quotes attributed to military commanders, Vice Commanders, and Deputies as "Commander."

Installation (location)	Military leader
Eskan Village, Saudi Arabia	Commander
Camp Lemmonier, Djibouti	Commander
Mildenhall, UK	Vice Commander
Camp Lejeune, North Carolina	Deputy Base Commander
Ramstein, Germany	Vice Director
Jacksonville, Florida	Commanding Officer
Aviano, Italy	Wing Leader
US Fleet Activities Yokosuka, Japan	Executive Officer
US Army Garrison, Germany	Commander

Military VAOs: Each installation POC was asked to provide a list of every current VAO at the installation as well as their contact information. We then randomly selected one VAO per installation to contact for participation.

Installation VAOs: Each installation POC was asked to provide contact information for the IVAO. We issued invitations to participate in the interview via e-mail and/or phone.

Department of State VAOs: Each target location staffs one Department of State (DOS) VAO that we contacted via a generic e-mail address to invite them to participate. In many cases, the DOS VAO had not been at post during the 2012 election, but the Local Election Staff⁵ was. The LES often has more responsibility than the DOS VAO when it comes to assisting overseas citizens with the voting process, making the LES a more than adequate alternative to the DOS VAO. For the purposes of this report, we attribute quotes made by a DOS staff member as "DOS VAO."

⁵ Local Election Staff frequently work in the Consular Section at U.S. embassies. Unlike DOS VAOs, their employment is not limited to a finite appointment period.

Embassy location	Interviewee
Sydney, Australia	ACS Chief
Sao Paulo, Brazil	DOS VAO and ACS Chief
Toronto, Canada	ACS FSN Supervisor
Shanghai, China	Consular Liaison
San Jose, Costa Rica	ACS Chief
Paris, France	Vice Consul
Berlin, Germany	Consul/ACS Chief
Jerusalem, Israel	Vice Consul
Tokyo, Japan	DOS VAO
Nairobi, Kenya	ACS consular section
Manila, Philippines	DOS VAO and ACS Chief
Johannesburg, South Africa	DOS VAO
Madrid, Spain	ACS Section Consular
Bangkok, Thailand	DOS VAO
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia	Voting Assistant
London, United Kingdom	LES/Voting Assistant
Caracas, Venezuela	Voting Assistant
Guadalajara, Mexico	Former DOS VAO

Organic VAOs:

Academics: Academics were identified through recent publications concerning UOCAVA voting. They were contacted via e-mail and/or phone and invited to be interviewed.

Study abroad leaders: Universities and colleges with large numbers of study abroad students were identified. We then obtained contact information for the study abroad office through public searches. Staff members who helped or in some way were responsible for providing information about voting to study abroad students were invited via e-mail and/or phone to participate in an interview.

Non-government organizations: A handful of organizations are dedicated at least in part to helping UOCAVA voters. Through public searches and conversations with FVAP staff, we identified these organizations and conducted public searches to find individuals' contact information. We issued invitations to participate in an interview via phone and/or e-mail.

Human Resource Employees: Through public searches and conversations with non-governmental organizations, we identified companies that send a large number of their employees to overseas locations. We then conducted public searches for the contact information of the Human Resources department and invited them to participate in interviews. This strategy initially yielded a small response rate. In order to remedy, we purchased a sample of HR employees in order to reach more potential respondents.

Conducting the Ethnographies

Ethnographies were conducted in-person by trained professional researchers at military installations, hotel conference rooms, and embassies, and held in spaces reserved specifically for this project. Spaces included conference rooms, offices, and classrooms that included desks, chairs, and computers. In order to mimic some of the steps respondents took to complete the voting process, we provided either a desktop computer or laptop with Internet access that the respondents could use in order to mimic what he or she did to complete certain parts of the process, such as searching for information about voting.

All ethnographies were video recorded and all respondents read and signed a consent form prior to filming. Ethnographies typically lasted 1-1.5 hours. Respondents who were military service members did not receive incentives for participation, per DOD rules. Military family members and civilians received a \$75 incentive for participation.

Local Election Official Ethnographies

Local Election Official ethnographies were likewise conducted by professional researchers. These were conducted in Local Election Offices across the country, so that LEOs could show interviewers their normal processes in their place of work. Local Election Officials were offered no incentive for their participation, and, in the interest of privacy, these ethnographies were not videotaped.

Conducting the Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted in-person and online by trained professional researchers. Online groups were conducted on online discussion boards; military in-person groups were conducted in conference rooms on military installations or nearby focus group facilities; military spouse and civilian groups were conducted at focus group facilities (where available) or in hotel conference rooms near military bases or in central locations (overseas).

All in-person focus groups were video recorded and all respondents read and signed a consent form prior to filming. Focus groups typically lasted 1.5-2 hours. Respondents who were military service members did not receive incentives for participation, per DOD rules. Military family members and civilians received a \$75 incentive for participation.

Conducting the in-Depth Interviews

All in-depth interviews were conducted via phone with the exception of a few in-person interviews that we were able to schedule at the time the researchers visited the installations. Interviews were recorded and transcribed with the interviewees' permission. Interviews typically lasted 30-45 minutes. No incentives were provided to respondents.



Detailed Findings⁶

⁶ In order to protect the privacy of individuals who participated in this study, all names and other personally- identifiable information were removed from transcripts.



The first steps UOCAVA voters take to complete the voting process will often determine their overall voting success. Voters must experience a “trigger” to begin the process early enough that the subsequent steps can be completed in time for the vote to count. Part of having this initial awareness is related to having adequate information and resources, which varies widely by military installation and overseas embassy. The dedication and effort put forth by actors who assist UOCAVA voters, including VAOs, LEOs, and organic VAOs are also critical to success, yet much variation exists.

Initial Awareness

The context in which UOCAVA voters find themselves influences their voting experiences. Unlike other Americans who, once registered, can essentially ignore voting until the day of the election, UOCAVA voters must plan for voting well in advance of the actual election, sometimes several months in advance. Essential to their success is experiencing a “trigger” early enough that motivates them to begin the process in the first place. The trigger basically functions as a reminder that it is time to begin thinking about voting and take the necessary steps to complete the process.

MILITARY

Some of the triggers are organic, like hearing campaign news on television or other media. CONUS military voters were more likely to report the perception that news about the election in 2012 was inescapable:

Moderator: *“So you know going back to 2012 when you were here, how did you first even think about voting? Like how did that even come to your mind?”*

Participant: *“You can’t miss it, it’s all over the TV.” –Voter, Army*

However, military voters and their families who are stationed overseas often feel more disconnected from U.S. elections and sometimes lack information about the candidates and campaigns. Their television screens are not dominated with election coverage, and the time differences impede their ability to communicate with their social networks back home. Thus, the “triggers” that voters in the U.S. experience often do not reach military OCONUS voters.

“Maybe you are used to watching MSNBC or CBS News or Fox News or CNN, whatever your news source is, it doesn’t run 24/7 over here like that. For us we watch BBC or Sky News and then our Armed Forces network puts on the other ones but you might get an hour, so if you happen to be in front of the TV when you have your favorite source of news, you can feel disconnected a little bit in that sense.” –Commander, Air Force

“Well for domestic personnel it’s very different than overseas personnel just because the infrastructure that they are dealing with is different and they are more connected to their communities, their U.S. communities, their voting districts. They might not be living in their voting district, but at least they are seeing U.S. news and U.S. culture and U.S. stuff all the time, whereas our overseas personnel are not.” –NGO

“I have the Armed Forces Network which gets me, uh, like Good Morning America. Um, it’s a couple of, like new, it’s a total hodgepodge of American television. It’s not every day at 8 AM there will be this show. It’s, it’s certain snippets of television shows at different times.” –Military spouse, Air Force

“Especially when you know, in [overseas location], it’s sort of, you’re sort of detached from what’s happening in the states... sometimes you’re behind on all the news and everything. Whatever is happening in the states here, you watch more, you get updates on the news and all that. But in [overseas location], there’s really not a radio really to get American news, so you have to turn on the TV you know, if you want news. So, and we didn’t have TV for like the first year and a half. Because we didn’t have the right set up. So, yeah we didn’t really, we weren’t too concerned about what was happening in the states.” –Military spouse, Army

“Unless I am aware that it’s time to vote, it wouldn’t cross my mind. Being overseas there isn’t a lot of knowledge on candidates whereas if I was in the US I would see posters and commercials.” –Voter, Marines

The feeling of being disconnected from events back home means that military voters often lack the organic triggers that motivate voters in the U.S., and sometimes they are not even aware that an election is imminent. However, many efforts are made to address this disconnect and proactively alert voters about upcoming elections so they can take the actions necessary to vote. The Voting Assistance Program in the military can be an effective vehicle for providing these triggers:

“The base here in _____ has a Voting Assistance Officer, so they send out a link to basically everyone [on base] and it gets them started; gives them the information they need to do absentee ballot. It just was a reminder; it was a good reminder with the command having a Voting Assistance rep sending out an e-mail. Basically it’s prompting you hey, you need to get out there and request your ballot type thing.” –Voter, Navy

“I wasn’t able to do my registration or anything until we got to Afghanistan. We got to Afghanistan, he was still a Voting Assistance Officer, he, you know, continually put out information to the platoon leadership all the time at our company meetings that we had on how to vote and who to talk to, obviously himself or other guys at the time if he needed to. Had good points of contact put out everywhere so he did really well in getting as much information out as he could.” –Voter, Army

“There is...the weekly e-mail is like don’t forget to vote and then the standalone e-mail is like: ‘hey I’m your federal voting officer, this is what you have to do to get in touch with me blah, blah, blah, blah.’” –Voter, Navy

“We routinely, as the election season comes around, we’ll make sure that we put the stuff in the paper. It goes on the Armed Forces Network TV stuff. Because we have kind of a captive audience, we do a bit of a media blitz to make sure that folks understand that hey voting time is coming up and it’s your responsibility to engage in that part of your constitutional rights.” –Commander, Air Force

Although most military spouses do not know what the Voting Assistance Program is, they unknowingly benefit from their resources, including the reminders and triggers to vote:

“Never heard of them before this discussion.” –Military spouse, Marines

“Around base, like say you’re going to the post office, there would be, like it will just be like sticking out of the grounds, like a little advertisement of where to go to obtain your ballot...it’s not just on the television...there will be advertisements around base as well.” –Military spouse, Air Force

Without the initial trigger (ideally, happening well in advance of the election), voters often either forget to vote or attempt to begin the process too late, after registration deadlines have passed or too late for the ballot to be received and sent back. This is a primary barrier to military voting success.

“As far as the experience of an overseas voter, it is a pretty simple process. The only frustration is you do have to plan so much further in advance.” –IVAO, Air Force

“Again, because they are not getting the same amount of daily news. This kind of information isn’t kind of just percolating in their life, and so by the time they are like oh it’s time to vote for President and I really want to do that and then they miss their registration opportunity.” –NGO

Military spouses and dependents are often aware of voting information only because their spouses are. That is, their initial awareness is sometimes dependent on whether or not their active duty spouses are aware of voting.

“...I am not uniformed so I guess this would make sense why I am clueless. Maybe my husband is more aware.” –Military spouse, Army

“Always the husband first....Well that’s sort of when the disconnect comes because sometimes the husbands get the e-mails and they don’t tell their spouses.” –Military spouse, Air Force

“I wouldn’t expect the military to give me something directly that they hadn’t first given my husband so he would always be my first plan of attack for that. So having stuff directed to him even its spouse related stuff like some of the spouses groups they have on base they think are useless, because um the information I get from him is more valid...so I would rely on him to provide me that information.” –Military spouse, Air Force

“Family members would typically only get the info brought home by the SM [service member].” –Military spouse, Army

Finally, while actors who help military voters may devote more energy to presidential election years, less attention seems to be paid to off-year and especially local elections. Voters expressed that there are not many resources or triggers when it comes to low-turnout elections. Thus, if the initial awareness does not exist, a successful voting transaction is unlikely to occur.

“I usually don’t receive anything on local elections. So local elections end up being a wash for me... maybe at the same time the local elections aren’t brought to the attention of us when we’re out operating at sea and you know one, who’s gonna pay attention to the kid from _____ when we’re off the coast of you know... we’re a _____ ship operating in the Middle East.” –Voter, Navy

“...At the time I was watching like BBC1 and they would, it wasn’t always at the beginning of the news, but it was somewhere in there about the presidential election that was coming up, but, but when it comes to congressional elections like the one that’s coming up this year, you hear nothing over here...” –Military spouse, Air Force

Actors who help UOCAVA voters also note that voting in local elections can be challenging for voters.

“Well, again, I just think it’s exacerbated with military people. This isn’t specific to them, but when it comes to voting in local elections, you know they don’t always have information.” –NGO

Voters report similar sentiments. Voters overseas in particular feel very disconnected from local politics and report that they lack information to make an informed decision.

“I am not spun up on local issues at all since I don’t see news local to my state/county, etc.” –Voter, Air Force

“So, when I got the [CONUS location] ballot, I only knew the president, I didn’t know anyone else, like the governor or whoever, so I just typed their name and then tried to pick someone like that based on their web-pages.” –Military spouse, Army

Many military VAOs report making a strong push to communicate with voters during presidential election years and sometimes for off-year federal elections, but are less active when it comes to local elections. Part of this is obviously related to the plethora of local elections that could be happening at any one time, and not knowing exactly which of their constituents would be eligible to vote in which elections, as well as the fact that the UOCAVA requirement extends to federal elections and those local elections appearing on the ballot at the same time.

CIVILIANS

For many civilian UOCAVA voters, the disconnection is even more exaggerated. They are not inundated with e-mails nor surrounded by other Americans as many are in the military. A few civilians report seeing voting information at gathering places that cater specifically to American expatriates, but most report seeing or hearing nothing of the kind. They are more likely to report hearing from non-governmental organizations (rather than from VAOs or FVAP), but in most cases only after they seek out the information for themselves. Thus, the absence of a trigger is a significant barrier to the success of overseas civilian voters.

“[It’s] hard to know what’s going on in your local county community to really be able to vote on the issues that the community is having. It’s not easy to find the information on those issues... You don’t have a sense of what’s going on in the community.” –Voter, federal employee

“I don’t get an e-mail from anybody. I don’t get, I receive nothing from my party. I receive nothing from the Voter Commission. I have to make time in my day to go seek out information and wave a flag for help.”
–Civilian voter

“Yeah, when I moved here my children go to an American school and I met a lot of American people there. So two of my friends, very close friends, they introduced me to this voting group that is...I don’t know how to call it. It’s a nonprofit organization that they send us all the information and I started to vote with them.”
–Civilian voter

Federal employees are an exceptional subgroup, in that most of them are surrounded by other Americans who work at the embassy, and are closer to information than an average American civilian living overseas. Still, even federal employees report feeling disconnected:

“When you live overseas, you’re less connected to what’s going on in the United States...you’re less connected to the news, television, and what’s going on in elections, especially for local races.”
–Voter, federal employee

The State Department Voting Assistance Program has great potential to engage overseas civilians and to provide triggers to ensure voters are aware of elections. DOS VAOs reported active engagement in the local communities, often working with other organizations and entities to reach American citizens and provide information on the voting process:

“Another big piece that we had was in _____ you have the medical school, which has about 150 medical students that go down there, U.S. medical students so worked a lot with them as well. We’d go out there and give a spiel to every orientation anyway, so this year I went out there and gave the spiel.” –DOS VAO

“We were invited to sort of a Parents Night at the _____ School, which is one of the international schools here in _____. And I took along with me, obviously, my Voting Assistance Guide and I took along Postcard Applications and that sort of thing and I did have some inquiries at my little table, maybe three or four, about voting.” –DOS VAO

The federal employees we interviewed reported hearing some communication from the embassy, including e-mail alerts about voting. Others were triggered by the actual events or communication materials they or their peers were putting out to the U.S. citizen community in the country in which they were working.

“An e-mail went out from State Department reminding you to register if you haven’t, and how to do it from abroad.” –Voter, federal employee

“Our consular section does do some [outreach]; it is probably not as prevalent internally as I would have expected. We send each other e-mails on all kinds of things through our distribution. I see a lot of those as a management officer.” –Voter, federal employee

“Well usually they put up posters [at the embassy].” –Voter, federal employee

“I think I only requested a ballot because we were doing a town hall meeting for people in the consular district to try and inform them about how to vote.” –Voter, federal employee

Even though U.S. embassies are responsible for providing voting information to U.S. citizens in that country, the embassy employees themselves sometimes do not receive or miss that information. Some federal employees had not heard of the term Department of State Voting Assistance Officer, or DOS VAO. There may be an assumption that because these Americans work at the embassy, voting information is readily accessible, for some of them it is not. Communication received through the STEP⁷ program often contains voting information, but many federal employees do not sign up for the program since they perceive no need to or are simply unaware of it.

Despite the reported efforts from the DOS VAOs, American civilians are mostly lacking information from the embassies. Although there are a few exceptions, most civilian voters report receiving nothing on voting from the embassy and virtually none of the participants had heard of a DOS VAO. However, some cite the embassy as a place they would go or try to contact to access information about voting abroad.

“Depends, well they are aware that the embassy knows what is going on. I’m not sure depending on how much publicity the embassy puts out and how early, whether people know that they can go to the embassy, they can call the embassy or they can find that program online.” –Civilian voter

“I registered with the US embassy when arriving and they send safety advisories and travel warnings. It seems they could easily send voting reminders and info, but I don’t recall receiving anything of that nature.” –Civilian voter

In some countries, there is a real antipathy toward the embassy as a place to spend time, based on past experiences, citing experiences of long lines or unfriendly staff. Unfavorable views of the embassy (long lines, location, unfriendly staff) seem to act as a barrier to using the embassy as a source of voting information.

“Nobody’s gonna stand in line to get into the embassy for three hours.” –Civilian voter

“Actually getting into the embassy seems quite difficult, much less even talking to someone knowledgeable.” –Civilian voter

“I’m sure there are U.S. Embassy officials that could help. But I think obtaining information from the website is kind of a hassle, and going to the actual embassy is even worse... I’ve been to an event they hosted at the US Embassy in _____... they know close to nothing. Or if they do know something they don’t tell you any information.” –Civilian voter

Civilian voters are more likely than other UOCAVA voters to be triggered initially by communication with an organic VAO. Civilian voters who are on these organizations’ listservs get plenty of reminders about voting and for the most part, feel positively toward these organic VAOs and their services.

“It was hard starting out to find out information on how I could go about to vote. When you leave the country there’s not really anything that’s given to you from the government, state or local that says; as a citizen going overseas for whatever reason, this is what you should know. The only thing that I got was uh, from one of the agencies in _____ when I did my visa paperwork.” –Civilian voter

⁷ Smart Traveler Enrollment Program: The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) is a free service provided by the U.S. Government to U.S. citizens/nationals who are traveling to, or living in, a foreign country. Part of the program allows Americans living abroad to receive information and updates from the nearest U.S. embassy, including information about voting resources.

“Well there’s this guy here named Yankee Mike. I don’t know what his real name is, who is like a really active participant in the Party who is always organizing things. He was organizing huge like expat events where he would rent out a bar to watch the debates and things like that. He might be the person...he might be the one that gave me all the information, in fact.” –Civilian voter

Still, for many civilians there is no trigger at all that they can identify. It is simply up to them to remember on their own, months in advance of the election, that they need to request a ballot.

“The first thing that made me think about it was just that I knew that I wanted to vote and it was like you know I moved here in September. I had come here in September and so like you know it was like fully voting season was upon us. And so I started trying to figure out how to do it and when I realized that I was gonna be able to use my own absentee voting ballot.” –Civilian voter

Resources

Voting absentee in the military or as a civilian overseas is a new experience for many voters. Even voters who have completed the absentee voting process previously must adapt to new rules and regulations that change the way they complete the process. Because the absentee voting process is constantly new in one sense or another, it is hard for voters to form consistent habits in a way that help them vote successfully in the future.

For this reason, resources and information about the voting process are paramount to voting success. It is not so much that the process is unusually difficult, but rather that it is often new to UOCAVA voters, as well as the actors who help them. Voters need this initial explanation of the process in order to be successful. Once voters feel confident that they understand the process, they are more likely to vote successfully and perceive the rest of the process as simple.

MILITARY

Military members, who tend to be younger, especially need resources, as many of them have never voted before.

“Agreed, younger Marines probably don’t understand the process or feel the ease of talking to the Voting Officer.” –Voter, Marines

“You tell younger sailors you’ve got to call and fax, ‘Well I’m not doing that. It’s too much work.’ If you just simplify it to you know a web site or something like that you’ll get a lot more I think from younger sailors.” –Voter, Navy

“Working and dealing with younger service members, many are very ignorant of the process and that holds them back. The command’s initiative to spread info about absentee voting and voting in general really helped get more of these young Sailors involved.” –Military spouse, Navy

“We have some kids that have just entered the service and they may not be 18, just turning 18 and maybe have turned 18 and haven’t had a chance to have an election yet, so we need to make sure that they have that training and that opportunity to know how do you even vote. It can be very foreign to some of them.” –Commander, Air Force

“I would sit [a new/inexperienced voter] down and just kind of ask them if they are looking to register to vote...I would just have them sit down and you know ask them you know where is their residence, if they have registered to vote anywhere before; if so, you know kind of walk them through the website, and you know we’ve got reference books here, and just walk them through the website. Either I can walk them through the entire process or at least give them the resources depending on how much time they have or what they are interested in.” –VAO, Army

CIVILIANS

Civilians also need information. There is a general feeling that information on elections is lacking overseas.

“Less important because it’s not like you can turn on the TV and see what’s going on at home or walk outside and talk to your neighbor about how they feel about what’s going on. Here, we’re kind of left in the dark.”
–**Civilian voter**

“And being outside the US, I am not as tuned-in to the elections calendar. No one on the local radio is reminding me to vote in any elections I can vote in.” –**Civilian voter**

FVAP.gov

Most actors involved in the voting process (including military leaders, IVAOs, VAOs, and DOS VAOs) report directing voters to FVAP.gov for initial information on voting. Virtually all of these actors have heard of FVAP and are at least somewhat familiar with the services provided. Furthermore, many actors report positive experiences utilizing FVAP services, including the website.

“The fact that it is on the website and you can go there pretty much any time. Being a VAO is not my only job, so I really rely on the website for pointing people to when they have questions or looking at the website to help answer their questions.” –**VAO, Air Force**

“I think that the information [on the FVAP website] that is given is very straightforward, clear-cut, and tells them where they need to send things and what they need to do with them.” –**LEO**

“Obviously the FVAP website is our main go-to website when people ask.” –**IVAO, Marines**

Moderator: *“Okay. And what do you see as the most useful source of information about overseas voting available to American citizens abroad?”*

Participant: *“Well the Internet with the fvap.gov website because everybody can get access to the Internet here, whether it be their own, neighbors, libraries, schools, workplaces. It would have to be the website because that’s got everything on it.”* –**DOS VAO**

MILITARY

A disconnect exists in that many military voters have little awareness of FVAP and FVAP resources (even though they may actually utilize their services unknowingly), yet the people who are responsible for helping them vote rely almost exclusively on FVAP:

Moderator: *“Have you ever heard of FVAP?”*

Participant: *“I think so, I think I saw it on a poster once.”*

Moderator: *“Okay. Have you ever been to their website?”*

Participant: *“I don’t think so.”* –**Voter, Air Force**

Moderator: *“Now are you familiar with the Federal Voting Assistance Program or their website?”*

Participant: *“No.”*

Moderator: *“Okay. So I’m just going to show you their website just to, I’ll turn it toward you just to see if it rings any bells here. Okay, so does any of that look familiar?”*

Participant: *“No ma’am.”*

Moderator: *“Never been to this website?”*

Participant: *“No ma’am not that I recall.”* –**Voter, Army**

At the same time, many voters seem to unknowingly use FVAP resources.

Moderator: *"I'd like for you to go online and we'll take a look at the FVAP website and see if this is the one you used. Does this look familiar?"*

Participant: *"No. I think I haven't been to the website. I think it was included as a link in some of the e-mails that were sent out by the Voting Assistance Officer at my command."*

Moderator: *"If you did go here, where would you start?"*

Participant: *"I'd go here to get started. I am almost positive I came through here. Register to vote and/or request ballot -- I'm trying to remember which of those I used. I think I started here actually."*—Voter, Navy

[RESPONDENT IS SHOWN FVAP WEBSITE] *"Yes, this actually looks familiar. This may have been where I got led to. Put in the state. Yes, this is familiar. I did do this. This is how I requested it and I tried tracking it after I had sent it in. We have L.A. County and all of that, I believe. Yes, this is the website."*

—Voter, Air Force

Some voters have heard of FVAP and recognize that it provides voting assistance, but FVAP has not achieved brand recognition among rank-and-file voters as the primary place military members go to access voting information. Officers seemed somewhat more likely to have heard of FVAP compared to enlisted members, likely reflecting differences in age and experience with voting.

"I've heard that they are the resources we should reach out to if we have any issues. Never utilized one, however." — Military spouse, Navy

"As far as I know, it is just another federal program to promote voting." —Voter, Marines

"Federal Voting Assistance Program -- POCs that have "resources" to assist you in knowing WHEN local elections are coming up (even small local ones) and HOW to register. They are supposed to help facilitate the registration process." —Voter, Air Force

In focus groups, people wanted a digital platform that would enable them to: sign-up for reminders, register to vote, get information about candidates and ballot measures, and to receive a confirmation that their ballot has been received. Of these, FVAP's website currently provides resources to help people register online—as local jurisdictions allow. There are opportunities to augment FVAP's resources, and to better promote the suite of web tools that FVAP has already developed.

CIVILIANS

Civilian voters are far less likely to have heard of or visited FVAP.gov. However, when they are shown the website, they react positively to the information available.

"I've heard of just the acronym but not anything about it." —Civilian voter

"They channel you immediately to your state because you type you know, it's a pull down menu, I go to [location] and immediately I'm dealing with [local election office] and [it] says, okay so what's your county and they link me to [location] county...You can't ask for more." —Civilian voter

"[It includes] like the basic...like the where, the when and the how. I mean those are the most important things and they stick out when you just look at these questions you know. There's when, there's where, there's how." —Civilian voter

Although there were few negative comments about the FVAP website, some actors who assist UOCAVA voters explained that although the website is an excellent portal or starting point for voters, there are still detailed and oftentimes complex rules that vary from state to state. This information, according to actors, is not obvious on the FVAP website, but it should be.

"It doesn't pop out that there are local rules that you need to follow too. It just doesn't pop right out. It's not a giant message banging somebody over the head saying before you do anything make sure when you are at the end of this process you know what your local state rules are in Election for returning your ballots." –LEO

Some LEOs also report broken or incorrect links that have been included in FVAP voting alerts that the LEOs then passed on to voters.

VAO Programs

MILITARY

Knowledge of the Voting Assistance Program, including who their VAO is, varies among voters. Some know their VAO personally and report frequent communication with their VAO while others have never heard of the term "Voting Assistance Officer" at all. Others are in the middle—they have heard of the term "VAO" or their "voting rep," but their knowledge stops there.

"But commanders are always like; voting season, our Voting Assistance Officer, go see him if you have questions. So I know this person, but there's nothing more to it than that." –Voter, Air Force

Moderator: *"Do you know who in your command that Voting Officer is?"*

Participant: *"No."*

Moderator: *"Do you know if you have one?"*

Participant: *"Within _____ it's probably just an additional duty of someone who has a full-time other job." –Voter, Army*

"If I had questions I asked my boss since he was the Voting assistance rep. for us anyway. He told me what I needed to do to make sure that I got my ballot. I went to where he said, I filled everything out, I got my ballot, went out to my car, filled it out, went back in, and dropped it off in the mail." –Voter, Air Force

Moderator: *"...There's a voting office here on base; did you feel that they care one-way or another about your ability [to vote]?"*

Participant: *"Truthfully, I didn't know about the one on base." –Voter, Navy*

"The Voting Assistance Officer lets service members know when states are having elections." –Voter, Marines

Most military family members are unfamiliar with the term VAO. Others have heard of the term, but do not know who their VAO is specifically.

"I'd ask my husband and he probably wouldn't know 'cause he's never told me about this person and he's very forthcoming with information." –Military spouse, Air Force

"Don't know where VAO is at my location -- may not have one here." –Voter, Army

"It's periodic right, it's on a as need basis. Like a gas mask, you know who issues you your gas mask? I don't know, until you need a gas mask. When it comes time to vote, then you'll look up who your VAO is." –Voter, Marines

Part of the variation may be related to the visibility of VAO offices at installations. We observed that so who need assistance to an easily accessible office. Other offices are located in areas of the installation that military members rarely frequent.

“We do all sorts of things from having an office on the base, a Voting Assistance Office right and it is centrally located. There is a reason why we put it where we put it. It is where we have our largest Walmart equivalent store, a PX they call it, our initial processing location.” –Commander, Army

*“Everybody has access to a computer at a much more convenient location than the Voting Assistance Office.”
–IVAO, Air Force*

“But to be honest with you, we’re in the same battalion, I don’t know where our battalion room is. I just know our voting office here, for the region, is right there at the end of this hallway. So I’ve no idea where the battalion one is.” –Voter, Marines

*“It’s kind of like a, a shot in dark if you’re going to like end up somewhere. And then like to get over there to get into the offices to find someone, I’ve gone there many times and it’s just like an empty room at least, now I haven’t been in the one here yet so I can’t say when you walk in it’s like a really pretty room but just an empty room. And it’s kind of like, where are the people to help me and you have to get all the way there, get on base, all that kind of, like I said I can just Google it and find it out or Facebook questions.”
–Military spouse, Air Force*

Visibility of voting assistance resources and communications seems to matter most for the initial motivation to begin the process. While voters report relying on VAOs less frequently when it comes to specific steps of the process (requesting the ballot, filling it out, sending, etc.), the VAOs are critical to providing initial information about the “first steps” when it comes to voting, as well as reminding voters to begin the process early.

Our research suggested that—at the time of the communication audit—FVAP was active on Twitter and moderately active on Facebook. Whereas, in the focus groups, Facebook was more commonly used than Twitter for finding information. The opportunity exists to more fully leverage Facebook as a platform for not only disseminating FVAP’s messages, but also for engaging with other users (e.g., sharing posts by partners that advance FVAP messaging, and reflect FVAP’s commitment to military and their families and also civilian voters overseas).

In some ways, military spouses are dependent on their active duty spouse to pass along information about the VAO program. Direct outreach to military spouses does not seem to be happening. This point was a key finding from the initial communications audit of FVAP materials that noted “there are limited communications targeted to military spouses and dependents.” The culture is such that military spouses rely heavily on information from their spouses about a plethora of items, not just voting.

“I think the info gets pushed to the service member and we forget to make sure that it is being passed along to home, or at least we aren’t engaging the family readiness groups.” –Voter, Army

Moderator: *“Were there anybody...any other members of the military you talked about the voting process with?”*

Participant: *“I’m sure we talked about it but I don’t remember. Either that or my husband talked about it and then he came and it’s like, ‘Okay this is what we’re doing, blah, blah, blah.’”
–Military spouse, Army*

CIVILIANS

Visible resources are nearly absent to the experience of civilian overseas voters. While theoretically the embassy should function as a central location where voting information is available, many civilians avoid the embassy or report seeing and hearing nothing about voting during their visits.

"I think you just mentioned the consulate services that changed so much. I remember 25 years ago, when I arrived it was almost like a beacon. It was a home away from home. You could just walk in anytime you wanted and just, they were. Oh, there was no glass, plexi-glass and no military all around, you could ask for all types of questions and ask for all types of things and now you can't even get in." –Civilian voter

A few reported seeing advertisements and flyers in bars or cafes frequented by expatriates, though that is the exception rather than the norm. Some voters pointed out that there are few central places in their communities abroad that American citizens might frequent and thus access voting information:

"There's a question as to where you'd put this that would reach people as...usually you know the post office in the states used to, but now everybody e-mails. And so where in ____ would you put this to reach the foreign population?" –Civilian voter

"I went to some American bars, and there's a get out the vote type of thing..... So that type of outreach is very helpful. I actually went to that bar to watch the election results, like together with all these people. So it's kind of like a nice, like bonding thing a little bit." –Civilian voter

Very few civilian voters have heard the term VAO or interacted with a State Department VAO. These voters usually either obtain information from their local election office, or an organic VAO.

"I'm sure there are U.S. Embassy officials that could help. But I think obtaining information from the website is kind of a hassle, and going to the actual embassy is even worse." –Civilian voter

"I never knew there was anything like it. I have sometimes wondered if I could drop off my ballot at the embassy to save on postal fees, but I never imagined there might be an actual human being there devoted to voting assistance." –Civilian voter

Specific Resources

While the biggest challenge is getting resources to UOCAVA voting populations in the first place, some evidence indicates that the resources currently available could be improved in some ways. FVAP's unique value—"as a one-stop shop for American citizens to cast and return an absentee ballot from anywhere in the world"—has not yet penetrated the marketplace according to our research. The initial communication audit noted inconsistencies in how FVAP presents itself in its materials: the presence versus absence of a tagline, and inconsistencies in descriptive text. These inconsistencies were also true in the materials we tested; for example, the military poster tested says "FVAP.gov" in large letters at the top of the poster, whereas the descriptive text, "Federal Voting Assistance Program" is in small lettering at the bottom. The civilian poster, the text "FVAP.gov" is accompanied by the program's logo and name. This affects FVAP's ability to gain name recognition. There was also confusion among civilians around who FVAP is intended to serve, as we note below.

CIVILIANS

Many civilian voters perceive FVAP resources to be geared toward service members. This finding is consistent with the communications audit, which indicated that FVAP's communications more effectively reach and appear targeted to the military, and can have the unintentional message (particularly through social media) that FVAP does not serve civilians abroad. Using military metaphors, insignia, and images can have this effect.

"But it's a little bit insulting in a sense where you feel like, well why are you asking for this and why are --- if you just focusing on military personnel? That's great --- for military. But, I don't feel like it's addressing the citizens in general where it's formulating so.... People aren't sure. It's just that that's what jumps out at me when I read all the information. It's the first thing that comes up. So it's just... It's just something I think would, for me, would turn people off a little bit. Some people will think, well maybe I can't use this because I'm not in the military." —Civilian UOCAVA-eligible voter

"My first impression is that it is only for service members, but now that I look closely I see differently. The Defense Department shield and secretary gave me that impression." —Civilian voter

Certain materials contain negative tones and lack a sense of certainty that voters want and need. Many voters commented that the language could have been more positive and encouraging. They also said that some of the materials raised additional questions and used language that provoked even more uncertainty.

"When I look at all of these documents, the tone is somewhat negative. And if not negative, it raises questions... So when I read a document; are there tax implications? And the last line says you know if you are concerned you should consult legal counsel. When you start putting things like that in it can make people that don't have confidence in you know... in what they know can happen and what they know can't happen, say you know what, I'm not gonna vote." —Civilian voter

"Well it mentioned several times that requirements vary from state to state. Well okay, so you've identified that you're not gonna completely help me. And you know at the end it talks about whether voter registration will affect your tax status. Well it may affect your tax status. You know and FAQ should be answering your questions; not posing additional ones." —Civilian voter

"I think the term voting residence is a little bit confusing; like it's not really a term that's like in widespread use. So I thought like the first question should be what is a voting residence." —Civilian voter

Contact information is essential—voters don't respond to vague directions like "contact your Local Election Official" for more information; they want specific contact information of a person or a group that can help them.

"It would be nice if the "Your Voting Assistance Officer" section at the bottom were populated with a name and contact details for a real person (drawn from a database referencing my last place of residence)." —Civilian voter

"To have the contact information of a particular place and person because I find that really crucial, because like I said if I came across this form I wouldn't think I could use it." —Civilian voter

Resource Case Study: Frequently Asked Questions

Frequently Asked Questions in FVAP.gov were considered too long and due to the dense copy, discouraging to read. However, once they were asked to glance through the questions, both military and civilian voters found the information helpful and provided ideas for additional questions.

“One thing that I do need to know how to do is how to change it so that I can do online voting ... and it’s not instantly obvious to me from reading this; maybe it says it, but if I was at home, I wouldn’t take more time than this to look at [the FAQs].” – Civilian voter

“It seems like some of the answers, they gave way too much and they got way too into it instead of just answering the question so that just kind of bothered me a little bit.” –Voter, Marines

The following questions emerged during the process as ones that should be added to the FAQs:

- Can my ballot be sent to me electronically?
- Can I submit my ballot online?
- How do you know if you are already registered to vote?
- Does it matter if I print my forms / ballots on paper that is not 8 1/2“ x 11”, depending on the most common size used locally (e.g., A4 paper in the U.K.)?
- Does it matter whether I use pencil or pen to fill-out my ballot?
- The answer to the question about whether registering to vote affects one’s tax liability is not adequately addressed in the FAQs for some.
- Do you need to register to vote every year? Note: this was confusing to people that were automatically being e-mailed a ballot from their home county.
- Note: some participants also expressed an interest in background information about the Electoral College system, particularly for younger and first-time voters overseas.

Resource Case Study: Civilian Poster



The military insignia leads some voters to believe that FVAP is a service for military members only, not civilians.

“Home” is an elusive concept to some, and also may not resonate for voters who have lived outside the U.S. for many years.

The rustic rural scene does not fit the image of “home” for many voters who live in cities.

Many voters commented that this contact information is essential, and should be highlighted far more prominently in the poster.

“It can be very helpful and especially if the name of the Voting Assistance person is here and how to contact them.” –Civilian voter

“I think it’s the whole tone of all of these documents; are saying you know come on home and vote, yee-ha. I don’t live there.” –Civilian voter

“A lot of the documentation is often warranted towards military personnel.” –Civilian voter

Civilians also noted that the absence of an American flag at first glance, makes it difficult to associate with the U.S.

“There is no American flag, this could belong to any country.” –Civilian voter

MILITARY

On average, military members are more receptive to the resources available to them, perhaps because the resources appear to be more tailored to their specific needs. Many commented that the Frequently Asked Questions (from FVAP.gov) was a helpful resource that answered every question a service member might have. Some also said this is a particularly important resource for first-time or younger voters. However, many respondents said that although the FAQs contained good information, the length and the way they are laid out is daunting and could dissuade people from actually reading them.

“Hits every possible question I can think of.” –Voter, Marines

“It explains the process and answers a lot of general questions one would have.” –Voter, Navy

“Make a condensed version but offer detailed answers in links.” –Voter, Army

“It’s way too much for me to read.” –Voter, Army

*“They should just highlight the really important parts. Like, for the best time to apply you just need to highlight ‘at least 90 days,’ and then that just sticks out and then people can go to the next question.”
–Voter, Army*

While military members commented that receiving e-mail reminders about voting is helpful, they also reported a feeling of being constantly bombarded with e-mails from other entities. With such a high volume of e-mails coming in daily, it is easy to miss information about voting and many voters end up overlooking this information. Some note that younger military members especially are less likely to read their e-mails.

“They help but they get on my nerves....all the e-mails and constant reminders and plan of the week every single week.” –Voter, Navy

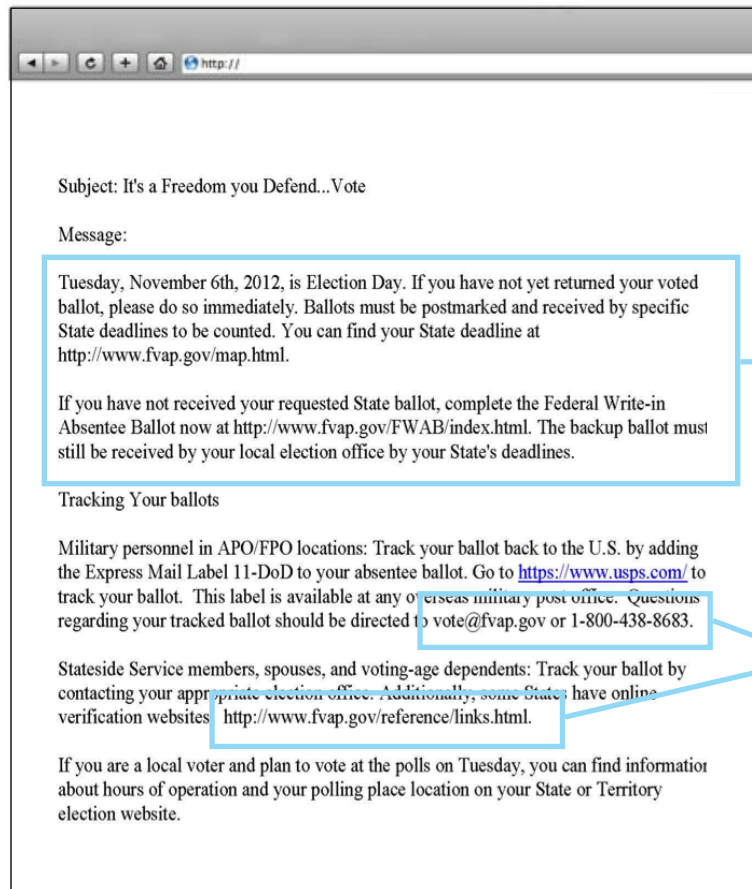
“We’re getting swamped daily with the e-mails so you just... a lot of people do delete them... No, I read them, but I know a lot of younger folks delete e-mails.” –Voter, Air Force

“Probably I’d delete it before I even read it.” –Voter, Air Force

“Helpful but not practical. Unless this e-mail is backed for its importance, a young person will not act upon it.” –Voter, Marines

Many voters recommend shortening the e-mails, perhaps reformatting to include bullet points so that only the most pertinent information is presented. Others also recommended different forms of communication, like texting or social media.

Resource Case Study: Military E-mail



Many voters commented that the text is too "wordy" and could be simplified, perhaps with bullet points.

Contact information is very useful to voters, and should be highlighted more prominently.

"You could either call or go online and various, so if you feel uncomfortable with one specific source you had multiple sources that you eventually got the same place." –Voter, Air Force

"It lists the website, a phone number, reminds people about families and unit reps." –Voter, Army

"It's too wordy and I find that what programs that I run and stuff, when you send e-mails that are over a certain amount of sentences the information starts getting lost because people stop reading after a certain point." –Voter, Air Force

"I like it when they can do a website, but they also tell you where to go on that website. Because that's the one thing I hated when they say; oh, go to this website and then you look at it and there's eight billion things to click on." –Voter, Marines

Resource Case Study: Military Poster



Every instance where “FVAP.gov” is used should also include the tagline for what the acronym FVAP stands for.

The military duffel bag is not current, and therefore looks like it was designed by an outsider or a very long time ago. The briefcase confused the military about who the audience was for the piece.

Service men and women mentioned that voting is a “right,” not a “freedom.”

The most important information—contact details for the VAO officer—are too small for people to see.

While military spouses are in dire need of information, they tend to distrust information that does not come through their active duty spouses.

“I think it depends on if you trust the people that are like passing the information down. If you don’t...if you don’t have the trust, I feel like I would trust more what’s being told my husband.”

– Military spouse, Air Force

“The spouse side of it is like the major rumor mill, so you never really know. So I find out what...I get that information; I get the rumors from the spouses and I talk to my husband and then he finds out.”

–Military spouse, Army

Military spouses also reported a heavy reliance on Family Readiness Centers and similar institutions on base that provide support and resources for military families. However, these centers do not seem to be providing much in the way of voting information, or at least spouses are not hearing it. There is much potential for these centers to act as information hubs for voting. And not only would military spouses benefit, but that information could then also be passed from spouse to active duty member, since spouses often take on the responsibility of finding information for their families.

“I’m sure everyone has dealt with this, anytime you need to do anything of importance and you have to go to MPF or family readiness center.” –Military spouse, Air Force

“Also, there’s FRG’s; Family Readiness Groups in each unit and they’re the ones that disperse a lot of the information; the community resources and that sort of thing.” – Military spouse, Army

“I would you know maybe two months in advance or so start putting balloons and people there at the PX and Commissary kind of giving out instructions like on how to vote, where to go or if you need an absentee ballot this is where you go and to try to get people geared up for it. The FRG, the Family Readiness Group people, they could recruit us to do it.” – Military spouse, Army

Note on Messaging: Military and Civilians

With both military and civilians, words like ‘should’ felt like a command and were considered demotivating. Participants had similar reaction to words that blamed, shamed or sounded accusatory such as “being away from home is not an excuse.” Declarative statements about voting rather than directives work better for both populations.

Voting Values

Besides experiencing an initial trigger, the values that voters bring to the voting process matter in terms of explaining voting success. Receiving an e-mail that says it is time to vote will not matter much if voters do not feel they have a reason to cast a ballot.

MILITARY

The most commonly cited reason service members vote is summarized by the common catchphrase, “if you don’t vote, you can’t complain,” as we have seen in other voting studies as well. This sentiment is a value among voters and motivates them to participate. Both service members and the actors who help service members often used a version of this phrase to explain the importance of voting:

“You are going overseas to defend that right and so that’s a right that you could exercise, and if you do not vote, then you really don’t have a right to bitch about who won or who didn’t.” – VAO, Marines

“I vote because I get tired of people complaining. And I feel like if you don’t vote, you don’t have a right to complain.” –Military spouse, Army

“There’s a whole of, I didn’t vote for ‘em so I’m allowed to complain. That’s not true at all. If you don’t take part in the process then you can’t change anything. If you don’t change anything then that means you like it. If you like it, well then pardon my language this place is screwed.” –Voter, Air Force

“Don’t complain if you don’t vote. Soldiers like to complain about all sorts of things. We do. Some people say if you’re not complaining you are not happy. We approach it from that standpoint that it really does matter.” –Commander, Army

Other voting values uncovered in this research include the fundamental rights of American citizens, and the importance of exercising the right to vote. Many service members also connect the idea of rights to their work as protectors of that right:

“They all need to exercise their franchise. It’s something that they are fighting for on a daily basis; it’s something that is a right that they need to exercise.” –VAO, Army

"I earned it by wearing the uniform. I earned it by serving 46 months in a combat tour, putting my life at risk. I earned it by the first time a bullet whizzed by my head and I thought I was gonna die. I earned it by watching a lot of my friends die and I earned it because I am a citizen of this country and that is my constitutional right; is to cast my vote and make my voice be heard." –Voter, Army

"It's a right that we've been given, why would we not exercise that right? That's what I tell my sailors too. I mean it's part of being an American so." –Voter, Navy

"Even though you may not see it today we're still fighting, just like they've done you know the past 230 some years; we're fighting for these freedoms that we... a lot of people just don't enjoy anymore, they take it for granted." –Voter, Marines

"We fight for it. We fight for other people to have the right [to vote]." –Voter, Air Force

*Military members also see voting as having a direct say in who their boss is.
"You are voting our commander in chief."* –Voter, Marines

"I work for these guys. They're making decisions that affect my life, that affect my pay, that affect my benefits, that affect my future health care, that affect my son's ability to obtain benefits, that affect educational benefits. These guys...you know whether I'm in their constituency you know locally...and say for my Congressman or for the State Senator or for you know the President of the United States who's Commander-in-Chief; they influence my life." –Voter, Navy

"I think with being a military family, it's extremely important. It should be important for everyone but our daily lives are affected by whomever is our Commander in Chief/President." –Military spouse, Army

"It matters to us because, since we are overseas...it could affect your base, it could affect your chain of command, it could affect your daily life in general. Pay, commissaries closed, budget cuts; feels like a lot of things are changing, so you really have to pay attention to politics." –Voter, Marines

"We're voting for our boss." –Voter, Air Force

We also observed that the value of responsibility and civic duty is felt somewhat more strongly among officers than enlisted members.

CIVILIANS

Among federal employees, many voters expressed their commitment to the United States and connected their motivation to voting to their jobs---they work for the federal government, so voting is often perceived as a duty. Some also report a culture of encouragement, even pressure among peers:

"Voting is part of your civil duty." –Voter, federal employee

"I think other foreign service officers would shame you if you didn't vote." –Voter, federal employee

Other civilians cite myriad motivations for voting, and most often connect their motivation to rights, duty, an opportunity to keep connected to their local community in the U.S., and American pride. A smaller minority noted that it's their right as taxpayers to be able to vote.

"Hey, it's one of the mightiest rights a U.S. citizen holds. I feel like it's a duty." –Civilian voter

"It's a right that we have that there are a lot of people who don't have it ---, so it's something important that definitely needs to be taken care of and I shouldn't take it for granted; just because we don't live in the States doesn't mean that we shouldn't remember that we are lucky to have this, this opportunity so we should take it."
–Civilian voter

"It's our civic duty... It's a huge privilege." –Civilian voter

"If I'm going to pay taxes overseas, I should definitely be able to vote overseas so it's only right, well and good that I'm able to and that they make it easy for me because I feel like I pay for that privilege." –Civilian voter

Staying connected to the U.S. is also a strong motivation for civilian voters. Some also note that they still care about their communities back home and the people in it, like their family and friends. Voting to them is a way to help contribute to better policy that will positively affect their communities.

"It is still a very high priority that I feel keeps me connected to the US." –Civilian voter

"I voted for the school budget for my town, from abroad, and I know that that makes a... I can vote for a town questions that are just my town, and then you really feel like, you know, this is important to me because my family still lives there." –Civilian voter

"[Voting is a] very high priority—because it's my main connection back to the U.S. It's the one time I check back in and engage. American politics and my country are important, so it's the golden link from my identity." – Civilian voter

"Our family back home is affected by our voting decisions." –Civilian voter

Encouragement and Support Among VAOs and Other Actors

Significant variation exists in the efforts of different actors involved in the voting process. Military leaders, IVAOs, VAOs, Local Election Officials, and "organic VAOs" (e.g. study abroad leaders, NGOs, HR managers) differ greatly in the amount of effort they put into communication with voters as well as the number of hours they devote to helping their constituents vote. While LEOs in one county might go as far as forwarding their office lines to their homes to ensure they can take calls from voters in different time zones, LEOs in other counties take a more passive approach and simply process the ballots that come in, without much effort to be proactive about the UOCAVA voting process.

"There is an extreme focus from the people that work for me who are high level managers to that this is an extremely important project for them for example to meet that deadline, that 46-day deadline, without fail. So it's one of the top things we do is focus on getting these ballots out and then processing them correctly. So I have to give it a five [out of five] because I have never seen people so focused on the program, and they believe in it. They know who these voters are and they are just going to make sure that they get their ballot material at all costs or try to get their ballots back from them." –LEO

"We do have a dedicated military and overseas e-mail address in the county that is used, that is on our website that the state has that they provide when military and overseas voters contact them, so that's the main source. However, my phone number is listed as a number that can be called for any military and overseas voter as well, particularly on the federal websites. And my phone is forwarded to my work cell phone. It allows me to talk to anyone at any point in time, particularly around the election time, but even before that I answer that regardless of what time it is and regardless from where the calls are coming. I do have it set up so that I have unlimited access in terms of long distance and overseas calling. But any point and time, a voter can call and speak with me whether I am at work or at a doctor's appointment or I am asleep. I put it such that I will wake up and speak to them." –LEO

"[The local election office] had it figured out. And I think it was because they didn't have a lot of them. There was a community spirit you know; we know these guys. You know they are sitting somewhere in a war. This is LC's son and my cousin and whatnot else, and so there is like this real like community spirit there and we are going to make sure they get their ballots, and they bend over backwards to do it. They have the phones forwarded to their houses so that if somebody calls in the middle of the night and have some problems with the ballot transmission or something, you know they basically would run into the office and make sure they get it tomorrow." –Academic

Some Local Election Officials also seem to place a great emphasis on providing support to military members rather than all UOCAVA voters. Military voters are especially prioritized in LEO offices that are located near military bases. The military is very much a part of these communities, influencing the culture of the LEO office. While this special dedication to military members positively enhances the voting experiences of military personnel, it sometimes operates as a detriment to the experience of other overseas voters, who may not be considered as important. The communications can also inadvertently serve to exclude or discourage overseas civilian voters who may not feel that they can take advantage of LEO resources. For example, one LEO office committed to ensuring UOCAVA voters are able to easily access their ballot online, uses dog tags as the symbol of their online program, which is titled “Your Vote, Our Mission.”

The level of support extended to UOCAVA voters is also a function of the resources available at a given election office.

“I don’t know if you have ever been to the Registrar of Voters in L.A., but it’s kind of a mind- blowing operation because they are so huge. It’s like a huge building with multiple floors and you know so many people are working there and most of them are real professionals, you know they have a lot of training. And then you go to Montana where you have the election office that’s staffed by two people that do 15 other jobs and they rely on temp workers to come in, if they do have the budget for temp workers to come in, and then they don’t necessarily have the time to even train them much. So you know there is these scale differences. So for like the Montana office to say you know you have to put all of this candidate information together and then get that to the UOCAVA voters as well and in an efficient way and in multiple ways like put up a website and blah, blah, blah, it’s just not feasible for those guys. You can give it to L.A.; they’ll figure it out. You know Montana they are just not going to be able to do it.” –Academic

“I didn’t have any problems, and when I called, you know, back then and talked to them, they were very, “Hey, yes we’ll get you registered. We’ll make sure everything is in line. We’ll get it out to you.” And, then, when I was coming for 2012 election, it just didn’t happen that way. And I don’t know if it was because different people were in the office because somebody different was working there or if it was because they just didn’t... they just stop caring. I don’t know.” –Military spouse, Army

MILITARY

In the military, differences in levels of support and encouragement are somewhat related to the culture of the installation, including how important voting is to the commander and other military leaders. There is a “trickle down” effect in that support of the commander seems to influence the efforts of the IVAO, and in turn, the VAOs. Indeed, the importance of voting to the commander is a critical variable that has a large impact on the success of the voting process on a given installation. Some commanders are particularly active and engaged in the voting process:

“I tell [the VAOs] that I want to put the word out. I don’t want to just -- I want to be pro-active. I want to get the word out. I want them to advocate for voting. It is important to vote and so that is part of my guidance. Don’t wait on folks. Make sure they know that we have an office; make sure they know. Get out there and talk to some folks. We tackle it among different lines, so that is part of the guidance I give. Then we check the 24/7 telephone; we made sure that we had a recording machine there. I guess the guidance was that we’re going to be 24/7 about this and we’re going to make sure that anyone that has a desire to vote they are going to get our help.” –Commander, Army

“Some of our airmen come in and they have never voted or their parents may have never voted. They are fighting for liberties and they are not even taking advantage of them. I think it is totally invaluable. I think the program is fantastic; I think it should be kept up. It is probably different than some people have heard before but I totally support it and I think it is important for us not to complain about these kind of programs, but to see the value in them and help push and support.” –Commander, Air Force

“Well, typically, once again, as you’re approaching an election site, they’ll maybe e-mail you...hey, remember, get with your Voting Assistance Officer. It becomes a priority for that Commanding Officer at that time.”

–Voter, Marines

Other commanders exhibit less dedication to facilitating the voting process and envision their role as less active. Some note that there are other missions in the military that take priority over voting.

“I mean when it comes up the way it would work is the voting officer here would tell me that we would be having a vote and I would say okay what assistance do you need from me besides just announcing it and kind of being the face of it... in terms of things we are doing around here, it’s not something I am marking on my calendar... I mean I vote, and when we are cracking towards a national election, we’ll certainly start to target that, but it’s really not on our radar right now.”

–Commander, Navy

“Some [commanders] are really into it, while others go through the motions.”

–Voter, Marines

“Commanders...usually say something in a commanders call, but leave the e-mailing to the voting rep.”

–Voter, Air Force

In addition to commanders, Installation Voting Assistance Officers also vary greatly in the efforts and dedication they put toward helping service members vote. Many IVAOs see their role as more resource-oriented. They feel that it is their responsibility to answer questions and provide resources to service members who come to them for assistance, but are not active beyond this more limited role. In contrast, other IVAOs make proactive efforts to raise awareness about voting and available resources and make sure voters know that VAOs are there to help.

“My position is mainly like a distribution center for the information from FVAP...I’m happy to help people if they come and ask for it. I don’t see it as my job to necessarily recruit people to vote. I think that is out of bounds, but I’m a willing aide to them if they are actively seeking to vote.”

–IVAO, Air Force

“It’s kind of more of a liaison between the voting assistance guys and the higher ups.”

–IVAO, Navy

Some voters sense that some VAOs are not as dedicated to their roles and often note that the VAO position is a collateral duty.

“Many times the Voting Officer is the unit’s Administrative Officer or S-1. This is a busy position and they are usually in their office. While they care about voting, they have other priorities and they will quickly give you information for you to figure out where to find out information on your state’s website.”

–Voter, Marines

“VAOs tend to make things harder, almost like they don’t want to be there and it a bother to help people.”

–Voter, Army

Military leaders, IVAOs, and VAOs often report a hesitation as far as how much they are willing to “encourage” people to vote. Many report that they are there to help and willing to help when voters come to them, but proactive encouragement and communication is not happening everywhere. This attitude is partly related to their awareness that the military is prohibited from advocating for a particular political party or candidate, and many actors in the military expressed a great sense of caution in this respect:

“Everything from our standpoint in the military is we are apolitical, so as I talk to my troops we are all very careful to not try and put our own personal political views on anyone because it is not appropriate and it may appear to be command influenced.”

–Commander, Air Force

The “apolitical” norm seems to trickle down to voters as well. The Marines and Navy personnel interviewed were particularly more likely than personnel at other installations to mention actively talking about voting and politics with each other. In contrast, personnel at Army and Air Force installations mentioned restrictions about talking about politics at work. The prohibition on discussing politics seems to affect motivation somewhat in that not being able to discuss why voting is important may create the perception that it is simply not important.

“We have a break room where we have a television. People go there to eat their lunch. If you are sitting there eating lunch and something comes up on the television, whether it be politics or sports or current events or whatever, it kind of causes discussion. What about so and so or I don’t agree with Obamacare or whatever. There are discussions. I think that is probably true of most [inaudible]. There is some discussion about it.”

–Voter, Navy

“So if you are someone who gets pretty riled up about politics or emotional about a certain topic you may or may not want to talk about that at work.” –Voter, Air Force

Some evidence indicates that the norm of avoiding political discussion may affect voting motivation:

“It is harder for us to get motivated because we’re not allowed to discuss it. I can’t sit here with you as another soldier and say; well, I think this guy will be good because he’s done X, Y, and Z or you know he’s you know he’s not doing what he’s supposed to be doing or; we’re not allowed to have those conversations.” –Voter, Army

“Everything from our standpoint in the military is we are apolitical... especially in the role I’m in, everyone is subordinate to you so it could be easily considered command influence.” –Commander, Air Force

Support and encouragement in the military comes not only from military leaders and IVAOs, but also experienced officers who sometimes act as informal, organic VAOs for younger members that are under their command. These officers often “spread the word” about voting, making less experienced voters aware of the process. Enlisted service members, who are often less experienced voters, welcome the guidance they receive, and some say even more guidance from officers would be useful.

“I didn’t make them vote; I recommended that they vote. They were younger than me, not by too much; but that was their first opportunity to be able to vote and that they should cherish and honor that moment in history, to be able to vote for the first time... I honestly don’t think that they paid attention to what was going on with the election or any politics prior to me talking to them. And so when I talked to them about it then they were, they were on point, they were good to go with what I said, so they voted.” –Voter, Army

Moderator: *“The guy who sent the courtesy reminder, was that a responsibility of his or he just did that?”*

Participant: *“He just did it because I think he knew a lot of people were in the same boat. He knew what to do so it was like hey for those of you who are unsure, here is what you do.”* –Voter, Air Force

“Every base, they’re always a little different but of course there should be uniformity, but they’re always a little different depending on where you’re stationed and things like that, how mail gets there and how things are handled. So it’s always a little different so you always, it’s just really, really important to just kind of talk to the guys, talk to the people, service members who have been there a little bit longer, if you have questions and you need some real definitive answers I think that really helps.”

–Military spouse, Navy

“So when you talk to your airmen about things that are going on because a lot of them do delete e-mails, it’s a good opportunity just to kind of highlight the website, the deadlines, and things like that, face-to-face with them so that they’re getting it and it might ring a bell; oh, I do want to vote and maybe I can get that website and then maybe they’ll go to the e-mail and read it or you know come up to you afterwards and say; hey, can I get that website from you.” –Voter, Air Force

Finally, active duty military personnel often receive support through the voting process from their spouses. Military spouses can function as organic VAOs themselves, and sometimes take on the responsibility of learning the process and requirements for both themselves and their spouses. The spouse's role is complicated, in that they very much rely on their active duty family member for trusted information, but they also take on a support role that includes seeking out this trusted information themselves. Because it is difficult to access what they consider trusted information, they do not perform organic VAO functions often, but are well-positioned and willing to do so.

"So a lot of the spouses I find are doing the research for their husbands, they become that, that behind the shields, like this is what, this is how you have to do it so give it to me all, all, all at once kind of thing so."

—Military spouse, Air Force

"Well, I'm the logistics person, I guess in the house, I do all the stuff, I make everything happen so when we talk about voting my thing to him was; well it's important, you're in the military and you know it, you should vote just because these things are going to affect you especially wars and things like that, so you have to vote. And here's how." —Military spouse, Army

CIVILIANS

Within the more informal UOCAVA network, HR managers and study abroad leaders provide very little, if any, direct support for overseas voting. Though they offer a wide range of services to help clients adjust to their new surroundings away from home, they say voting-related questions rarely come up in this context. As a result, these organic VAOs assume most people are able to navigate the voting process on their own or, if not, are able to find the necessary support elsewhere.

"No student has come to me personally and asked about how do they do absentee voting and things like that, but I definitely think it's something that we need to be able to tell students upfront to remind them. I don't know if they just don't vote or if they figure it out on their own or if they ask their program director."

—Study abroad leader

"I can't remember if I've ever received any questions, but if I did receive them I would refer them to the Voting Information Officer at American Citizen Services." —HR Manager

"And I don't spend a lot of time on this issue. Or us, it's, again, not something that we get any resources to work on, so all the resources that we invest in this are all our own resources. And there is a lot of domestic stuff where our people...because we use our volunteers to do it and our volunteers are all domestic. You know most of what they do is domestic focus, so the overseas and military people don't have a lot of interaction." —NGO

However, although organic VAOs may not provide voting support, many of them would be willing to do so and recognize its importance. This represents an untapped opportunity for FVAP to develop partnerships with those who interact with UOCAVA voters in the private sector or academia.

"And then working for the pre-departure meetings that all the students go to. We have a travel clinic that talks about medicine and vaccines and things like that, so I organize that and work with the doctors for that. And so we do pre-departure and then when the students actually there and just keeping in touch and making sure everything is going okay." —Study abroad leader

"So I think [voting information] would be part of their assimilation package. There is a whole litany of information that they are given when they go on assignment, so I think it would be incorporated into that message." —HR manager

"Yeah, we would be happy to let students know. As soon as they are recruited, we could let them know if it's a year that there's a big election or any election year and let them know go ahead and be thinking about how you are going to go about getting your vote in. So yeah, we would be more than happy to do that." —Study abroad leader

Military vs. Civilian VAOs: Key Difference

A key difference in the support provided by the State Department versus the military is the turnover among actors responsible for helping UOCAVA voters. Most military VAO programs have high turnover which is related to the transient nature of military jobs. VAOs are appointed for a limited period of time and teams of VAOs rarely remain static. Therefore, few to no VAOs or IVAOs have experienced more than one election in their positions. In contrast, while DOS VAOs are also appointed for a limited period of time, Local Election Staff at U.S. embassies are often employed in long-term positions and have experienced multiple elections. In essence, some newly appointed military VAOs are starting from scratch, with little to no institutional knowledge or structure as guidance. This pattern was particularly observed among the Air Force. Three illustrations from Air Force IVAOs are listed here:

“So when I took over, I didn’t have any continuity to go off of because the program had been in place, but the individual had left prior to us being able to cross paths and compare notes.” –IVAO, Air Force

“My appointment may not have been similar to others where there is usually an overlap between officers. I didn’t have that, so the guy that was before me is deployed so I don’t have anything from him. There was no continuity binder. I had to build my own. Then there was -- I had just made the call to get the unit officer’s reappointed or call for a new appointment because I had no list as to that. I’m still working with our base also to get the e-mail and telephone set up. It didn’t appear that there was an actual office set up like our letter kind of stated. It has been interesting trying to sift through all the information, all the different levels of information since there is a DOD level and then an Air Force instruction and so on. That has been -- I’m not sure still if I have completely read everything that there is but I think I’ve got the general gist things. Sometimes just getting hold of the right people to fix our e-mail that we’ve gotten no response from can be difficult.” –IVAO, Air Force

“It was a nightmare for me because in addition to managing my very stressful workload and a very heavy workload, I was trying to learn the job on my own, no training whatsoever, just trying to pick the pieces and read the ridiculous Air Force Voting Action Plan and trying to make sense. What are they talking about?... What I recommended to the wing commander is you need to make the change for your Installation Voting Assistance Officer during an odd year and the month of October or November so that the outgoing Installation Voting Assistance Officer can train the incoming Voting Assistance Officer prior to any deadlines, prior to the heat of the war, you know.” –IVAO, Air Force



Although FVAP and others in the UOCAVA voting community consider registration and ballot requests one and the same as far as a “step” to take in the voting process, voters tend to see these steps as different. Many voters will check their registration prior to embarking on the process of requesting and receiving a ballot, or simply have questions that solely relate to registration, including what state to register in. Therefore, we report some issues surrounding registration specifically below.

Confusion Around Residency

A key barrier for some UOCAVA voters is not knowing which state or county to register in.

“Well for example, when you are allowed to register at your last address in the states, but you don’t live there and no one you know lives there, they are not really overly interested necessarily in registering there because if anything does go to that address, then it gets returned as undeliverable and then they end up getting put on you know the special “maybe we should purge this person list” because the mail came back undeliverable.”
–NGO

“The common question is people that have not lived in the U.S. that have U.S. parents that they were born in _____ and in the U.S. as to which state do I send my ballot to.” –DOS VAO

MILITARY

Service members, because of the mobile nature of their jobs, are especially confused as to their proper voting jurisdiction.

“So then you know the question is do I register my parents’ address, do I register at my last military because at least if it was the military maybe they would know like my last military installation. So they have questions about where they should register.” –NGO

“Maybe a service member who is on their third assignment and they’ve lived in 2 different states and they have a home in such and such and they file taxes in such and such state, but they were registered to vote in such and such state. They didn’t know where they were supposed to claim their residency for voting purposes.” –IVAO, Air Force

“‘Home’ is a complicated term in the military. My house is in AZ, I live in TX, licensed to practice law in WA, vote and drivers license in FL.” –Voter, Air Force

“I tried to [vote in the 2012 election]. I was under the assumption I was already registered in the county... I thought that because I got my draft number there... That was 11 years ago... Then I come to find out the year of election, I forget when. I like to plan ahead so I started researching, making sure I was ready to vote. I think it was around April... I wasn’t registered. They said you are not in the system at all, so I was kind of upset.” –Voter, Navy

“It’s really embarrassing. I don’t, like, know where I’m registered to vote.” –Voter, Army

CIVILIANS

Some civilian voters who have never lived in the U.S., or have not for many years, have trouble understanding how and where to register. Residency questions are common among this population. Although existing FVAP resources to answer these questions can be helpful, most civilian voters are not aware of these resources.

"I should add that having to vote in my last place of residence was always a problem and I never could figure out whether I could change." –Civilian voter

"The only problem might be for people who have a big moving history or they can't find exactly from where they can vote." –Civilian voter

"I also found it kind of confusing, I think especially for someone who's not lived in the states since I was like a really, really young child. I didn't know what my last address was." –Civilian voter

"I sometimes feel frustrated, because I vote, you vote in the last place you lived in, which for me is _____, and um, but I don't have any ties to that city, I just happened to live there for nine months before I moved here. So, I'm sort of disconnected with the politics in the city and I don't keep up with them... so I sometimes wish there was a voting sort of status for people who don't live in the States, you could just vote as a non-resident, and not be tied to some community that you may not connect to." –Civilian voter

Deadlines and Rules

Not knowing registration deadlines is also a barrier to casting a ballot. Many VAOs on both the civilian and military sides report that this is one of the most common questions they receive from voters.

"I think people don't realize what timeframes are and they miss it, or they are just not educated enough to go forth... Knowing that you need to register to vote in a certain timeframe before the actual election. I think sometimes the time just slips by without them realizing it, or the options that they have if they do miss those deadlines... I think sometimes, especially the younger folks when they don't realize that, they shrug it off and end up not voting." –IVAO, Air Force

"They say oh I registered and they come the last minute when even the deadlines have been closed. You cannot register and normally they are not very happy with that." –DOS VAO

However, it is not so simple for VAOs to answer these questions. Many lament that different rules across 50 states make it difficult for the VAOs to help voters, and it is impractical to expect that VAOs could become experts on the rules in every state. In essence, the VAOs are in the same position as the voters as far as what they know about a particular state's rules. The difference is that most VAOs will take the time to help voters research the deadlines and rules, and will often direct them to FVAP.gov.

"The whole process is just as confusing as hell because each board of elections can decide whatever in the hell they want, so that was something that was difficult in terms of submitting information and kind of -- it was hard for us to answer a lot of questions because we would sit out there and say right from the get-go I do not proclaim to be an expert on U.S. election law because it is impossible because I can't tell you the rules of Washington County, Nebraska as opposed to [inaudible] County, New York, which is where I'm from. That was clear to us in the consulate community but still not for the general public. The general public, what do you mean? You're supposed to know everything. That was a bit of a roadblock." –DOS VAO

"We had a few here and there that yeah you hadn't been here in so long, but maybe just determining that residency might have been a little bit of a question with some folks and we weren't that knowledgeable on it either." –IVAO, Army

Registration Confirmation

Some voters also report attempting to register, but are uncertain if their registration actually went through. Voters who can easily check the status of their registration are more likely to be successful in subsequent stages of the voting process.

"[I tried] to contact the registration office in _____ to register to vote from that state so. I took the time online to do, go through all that progress and didn't hear anything back and just got busy with other things and continued on and wasn't able to vote [in 2012]." –Voter, Army

"I went out of my way to make sure that [I] was registered. So I paid a little extra money out of my own pocket to make sure that I had a signature of somebody that received it in the voting office." –Voter, Navy

"The first time um, trying to figure out which state I should register. Where I'm residence online, alias is right now which is Texas or where I was when I joined or my last state side; so those questions where on my mind... I attempted [to register] and I think it declined because I didn't have a permanent [address]." –VAO, Air Force

Most Local Election Officials do not automatically supply a confirmation that a voter's registration or ballot request has been received, though nearly all voters agree that the idea is a good one. LEOs in low-volume counties sometimes report e-mailing voters to let them know their registration/ballot request was received and when to expect their ballots. High-volume counties usually allow voters to check the status of their ballot online, though most voters are unaware of this option.

Difference: Military vs. Civilian

While military VAOs are just as likely as civilian VAOs to receive questions about registration, the nature of the questions are slightly different. Military VAOs report more confusion around residency, while State Department VAOs report confusion about timelines for registration.

"A lot of people aren't aware of the fact that they need to have registered prior to the election in order to vote it... I'd say it's maybe a 30/70 split as far as 30 percent didn't know they had to register ahead of time." –DOS VAO

"I think one of the confusions that the military in particular is probably when they're trying to decide am I going to change my voting place to my current living location versus having a state of residence somewhere else that they kind of don't want to lose." –IVAO, Air Force



When a UOCAVA voter requests a ballot, he or she must do so far enough in advance to receive it and send it back. The problem is many voters are unaware of deadlines, and mail delays that voters overseas experience compound the problem. Online requests are a very helpful innovation, and many actors who help UOCAVA voters cite the ability to request and receive the ballot online as the most significant recent improvement in UOCAVA voting. However, online access is not a panacea, as the technology introduces unforeseen barriers, such as the perception that voting is not important, or that the vote will not count. Furthermore, internet access and familiarity is not distributed equally among UOCAVA voters, with older voters less likely to be Internet-savvy, according to actors who help UOCAVA voters.

Timing of the Request

The main barrier to requesting a ballot is simply not knowing when to do so. UOCAVA voters are in a very different position than voters who cast their ballots at the polls. For the latter group, there is one Election Day—the clear deadline for casting a vote—but for UOCAVA voters there is not one obvious date to begin the voting process. The trigger of an Election Day is missing.

MILITARY

Because of this context, many VAOs report that voters often request their ballot too late, which is particularly problematic for voters overseas who are then hampered by mail delays.

“A lot of people, they don’t get here in time to get all that set up and they wind up having to use the emergency ballot, which only allows you to vote in the federal elections.” –IVAO, Navy

“Another really popular question is going to be...around election time, the most popular question we have is ‘Where is my ballot?’ ...Those are usually people now who sends in their registration and ballot request form really late or sometimes within like the last month.” –NGO

“The only [snag] that I can think of is if you wait too long, too late...time is an issue...if you procrastinate and don’t request your ballot...So that’s the only thing and most of the ownership would be on the member themselves...They need to make sure you do get the materials because you have to request them to get them.” –IVAO, Navy

CIVILIANS

DOS VAOs report similar challenges, and civilian voters themselves recognize how beginning the process too late hampers their ability to vote successfully.

“And I think people who are not accustomed to living overseas who are just used to like you know seeing their local newspaper or something and oh you know it’s Election Day, I’ve got to leave the house a little earlier so I can vote on my way to work or something. You know for overseas voters, they really have to plan ahead and say well I need to do this by this date.” –DOS VAO

“If they apply in plenty of time, I think in the majority of cases, it works very well, but it’s down to the individuals really getting their act together on getting the application out there at the beginning of the year.” –DOS VAO

“Well I know that, in order to do it, you have to apply like months before it happens. I know this friend that like didn’t think about that until it was too late.” –Civilian UOCAVA-eligible voter

Civilian VAOs also vary in communication efforts about ballot requests. Some VAOs report incorporating the FPCA in other transactions that occur at the embassy. For example, voters might be given a FPCA when they come in to renew their passport or at least reminded that voting is approaching and that a ballot request should be made. This strategy of incorporating voter registration and ballot request in other transactions seems particularly effective in ensuring UOCAVA voters can vote in these cases where they have other business at the embassy.

“You always remind people [about voting] when they come to the consulate when they renew passports or when they come to register their children.” –DOS VAO

“What we would do is we had information posted in our waiting room. Again, as an American Citizen Services office, 95 percent of my day would be done in Spanish still so putting FVAP information out there and saying as a U.S. citizen you might be eligible to vote because some of them did have the residency requirements.” –DOS VAO

“I think I requested a ballot because we were doing a town hall at the embassy.” –Voter, federal employee

Some LEOs report sending reminders to military and overseas voters that are in their system, but the majority do not. They note the impracticality of such an approach, because of the mobility of these populations. LEOs are also very attentive to the 45-day deadline for sending UOCAVA ballots and successfully meeting this deadline. They attribute non-receipt of ballot to errors in the mailing address on the ballot request or postal delays in foreign countries.

Mail Delays

Mail delays are a problem among OCONUS military personnel in particular, though significantly less so among CONUS voters.

“I guess one of the things that is slightly different that I wasn’t used to is mail over here is a little bit slower no matter what we do. It is just the nature of having to take that last big flight across the Atlantic Ocean to get here. It is a little bit harder than getting it across the United States, so that would concern me a little bit, especially if -- depending on the district you are in if they weren’t updating their ballots fast enough that could be frustrating.” –IVAO, Air Force

“I was on military duties, I ordered it and had it sent to the base because I knew I’d be there. I gave myself a decent amount of time because I figured I’d probably get it within the next week or two but it ended up taking a month to receive everything.” –Voter, Air Force

“It also feels difficult to meet the deadline considering deployments where mail takes awhile to travel. I was in Okinawa, Japan at the time.” –Voter, Marines

Some active duty military and military spouses reported distrust of the military mail system, opting instead to use the postal service in certain locations:

“I think I’m fortunate just being overseas what I’ve seen so far is the mail system kind of plays a huge role like when I submitted mine, I had the choice to go on, on base in Ramstein and submit it but I just did it through the German post ‘cause that was so much more reliable. So I submitted my American presidential ballot through the German post.” –Military spouse, Air Force

“As soldiers overseas, it’s a big concern, because everything is a delayed process and if you’re using a military postal service, mail gets delivered when the truck is full, for the United States. So they could sit on a plane or stay in an area for two to three weeks and a soldier would not receive it for a long time so the biggest fear for them is that their votes don’t count, because they don’t make it back in time to be counted.” –Voter, Army

“I used the British post, postal service for my absentee ballot because the U.S. postal service isn’t great for getting things from remote locations... Once it reaches the military hands in New Jersey or New York or whatever, once it’s in their hands it’s... who knows what happens. You don’t know, I mean you could order something on the internet and it should get in a week or two weeks and you could get it two months later because they got it there to their post in Jersey on time, but the military mail didn’t get it back. And it’s the same going home, like when you mail things home you’re kind of at their mercy, that’s if they get it.”

–Military spouse, Air Force

VAOs do not seem particularly knowledgeable about how to advise a voter who has not received their ballot. Many are unaware of the FWAB option, and most report that they would tell voters to contact their county.

Moderator: *“Say the election was imminent and someone came to you and said I applied for my ballot ahead of time; I did everything right. It is not here; what do I do? What’s your advice?”*

Participant: *“I would say let’s talk about what you did to send off to make sure you have everything you are required to have to have the absentee ballot. That’s all I can -- I really don’t know what to do at that point. I’d have to write e-mails at that point to my point of contact to see what their recommendation would be, and that’s about all I have at my disposal.” –IVAO, Air Force*

CIVILIANS

Overseas civilian voters also have difficulty with the mail systems. Not only are there mail delays, but some voters and VAOs also report that the postal system in certain countries cannot be trusted.

“The mail service here... it’s not very reliable.” –DOS VAO

“Other than the FedEx, I mean you can’t put it in the mail in [overseas location]. What they don’t steal they throw away.” –Civilian voter

“I chose the embassy because I trust that they have an interior carrier system that is much faster...and reliable than [country] mail.” –Civilian voter

Some civilians pay for their ballots to be sent via certified mail, to provide an extra guarantee that the ballot will make it back to the U.S.

“We always send our ballots early and pay for international express post just to be sure.” –Civilian voter

“I’ve actually FedEx’d it because the [overseas location] postal system, it’s pretty random.” –Civilian voter

Mail service (through the embassy) is much better for federal employees. Although some report delays even with the mail service that comes through the embassy, efficiency and trust in the mail system is substantially higher among federal employees.

“I mailed it using the diplomatic pouch...the diplomatic pouch is observed by an American at all times... there’s a diplomatic courier that comes and watches it so there is never a concern with people opening our mail.” –Voter, federal employee

“Absentee voting [from here] is relatively straightforward...Once you have the absentee ballot you’re able to mail it through the embassy. So it’s pretty easy.” –Voter, federal employee

Many DOS VAOs are not confident in how to advise voters who have not received their ballots.

“I would sit there and say yes, you can go to FVAP and if you click on this it will ask you. People that could sit there and say you know how to fill out your name, you might need the form wizard to do that. I would Google it and skip that step... Google, _____ County Board of Elections.” –DOS VAO

On both the military and civilians sides, many VAOs tend to attribute not receiving the ballot to failure on the part of the voter to “follow instructions.” This perception seems to limit the efforts VAOs will make in helping ensure the voter obtains their ballot through some other method.

“I ran into someone that registered to vote absentee and they were just at home waiting for their absentee ballot, just waiting and waiting and waiting for it to come, but they didn’t read the instructions on FVAP.gov close enough to realize that you need to go on FVAP.gov and print out your absentee ballot.” –IVAO, Navy

LEOs also lament voters’ failure to follow instructions and cite this as the top reason why voters do not receive their ballots on time or at all. However, observation of LEO offices and procedures suggest ways in which the instructions could be improved. For example, one LEO office printed their own sets of instructions that are mailed to military and overseas voters. The content of the instruction sets are different for military and overseas voters, but look very similar. Both sets are printed out of the same printer, and could easily get mixed together. Other offices printed instructions for each population on different colors of paper to avoid mix-ups. Many offices also take for granted that voters will read instructions thoroughly; we know from interviews with voters that this is not the case. Efforts to simplify instructions and also send reminders about instructions might be effective.

The Forms- Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) and Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (FWAB)

Federal Post Card Application:

MILITARY

While the Federal Post Card Application can be used to register and request a ballot simultaneously, many military voters remain unaware of the FPCA as well as the fact that registration and requesting a ballot can occur with the same form. Many voters reported contacting their Local Election Official directly to obtain their ballot.

“What I ended up doing was going directly to the web site for my district in [voting jurisdiction] and basically read all the information they had on their web site about military and absentee ballot and requested an absentee ballot.” –Voter, Navy

“I just went in and typed, you know, the [city] voting, voting absentee in [city] and then it pulled up. I started at the city site, I might have actually ended up on the state site, I don’t know. But, it was, it was the county, it was the county that popped up that I actually got the information from.” –Military spouse, Army

“I mean all you got to do is just call your local officials and they’ll take care of you has been my experiences.” –Voter, Air Force

The low level of awareness of the FPCA is related to the variation in communication efforts among installations. On some installations, VAOs are very active in communicating the steps of the voting process, and many make FPCAs readily available at voting tables or booths around election time. In-person assistance seems to be tremendously helpful to voters—for one, it acts as a “trigger” to begin the voting process, and secondly it ensures that resources are available for voters to correctly complete the ballot request process.

"The voting program has got fantastic resources. They put out regular information either electronically or in hard copy. As we get closer to election season, especially as we start getting to those registration deadlines, we utilize our Public Affairs Office to help advertise that and get the word out through our commanders to make sure that individuals who are from those states have the opportunity to go register and help them through that process." –**Commander, Air Force**

"You registered for your absentee ballot; as you came in the building, there was a little table set up with some soldiers there, you know filled out some forms. And then I actually went online last year and filled out my stuff and it got sent to me and then I filled it out and sent it back." –**Voter, Army**

Other VAOs see their role in more limited terms. They wait for voters to come to them for a FPCA form or to request a ballot. While this less active attitude seems to be more common in the military, some DOS VAOs also take on a role that is not as active.

"Go to www.fvap.gov and you are going to figure it out on your own. You know there is picture of a guy in a uniform, click on the one with the guy in the uniform, click on your state, and it's going to bring up anything you ever needed to know. You know people called me and they were like oh it was super easy; I didn't need help." –**VAO, Air Force**

CIVILIAN

Virtually no civilian voter knew what a FPCA was, though some recognized the form when shown a copy. Like military voters, most civilians go directly to their counties for ballot requests. Civilians tended to be more critical of the FPCA form compared to military voters, often commenting that it reminded them of a tax form and also noting certain parts of the form that were confusing:

"I don't remember why I filled out the one for my county or state instead of this, but I think not every...this was like ten years ago so I'm not sure if I'm saying this right, but I don't think...I don't think I was able to use this to submit...to apply for my absentee ballot. I think I used a different form because this doesn't look familiar at all, although the envelope, the postage part, does look very familiar." –**Civilian voter**

"I would have no idea what to put in additional requirements for your state. Like that seems like why don't you tell me what you need, not me having to tell you what you require." –**Civilian voter**

"One thing is the voting residence address, because I think a lot of us don't have them...like the last address, residence was like an apartment that I was renting somewhere, random, you know what I mean? Nobody that I know lives there now. I don't understand why I would have to, like put that. Or like, for example, where I grew up and I moved, so I don't have that. I mean, that's where I'm registered to vote probably still right now." –**Civilian UOCAVA-eligible voter**

LEOs are mixed when it comes to the FPCA. Some advocate its use, and recommend UOCAVA voters use it. Others prefer their state-specific form and recommend that to voters.

Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot:

MILITARY

Even though the FWAB is available as a back-up for those who do not receive a ballot on time, many voters and even the actors who help voters are not very familiar with this form. Of those who were familiar or had some experience with the FWAB, confusion abounded. Both voters and actors who help UOCAVA voters reported that the instructions are unclear. Much of the confusion surrounds having to research who and what is on the ballot.

"I originally tried printing -- before I requested the absentee ballot, I tried doing the write in ballot. That was very confusing because I was unsure what to do with that." –Voter, Air Force

"The problem with me with FWAB is just that FVAP hasn't been very good about it and the instructions are not very clear, so I would never have suggested that necessarily as the solution, but it could be the means of achieving the same-day registration thing. It just wouldn't necessarily be my first suggestion." –NGO

"It's too...it's too general for the state. I looked at that; between that and the form that you fill out requesting a ballot and I said, 'Forget it.' It's not user-friendly." –Voter Navy

"By the time you do the research to figure out who's running for office in each category you might be eligible to vote for you could have just registered. I'd only use it as a last ditch effort to vote for the major offices (president, etc) if I was deployed and no way I could get my ballot back in time." –Voter, Air Force

"There was a lot of repetitive information. I had to write in the names of the candidates and this left a lot of room for error for misspellings, wrong part affiliation and illegibility." –Voter, Army

CIVILIANS

Virtually none of the civilians we talked with had ever used a FWAB. Their reactions to the form when shown were similar to the reactions from military personnel: civilian voters found the form confusing and could come up with myriad ways that vote failure could happen with use of the form. Many felt overwhelmed by the perceived effort it would take to research who and what is on the ballot.

"It seems to require quite a lot of research and I wonder if there was some way to put in your state or area and have like an online kind of database, it says to put in the right names. I think that would be much more friendly. I kind of wonder if there would be an online sample ballots like to look at." –Civilian voter

"The ballot is not tailored to the local elections so I then have to personally look up the local candidates and ballot initiatives on the internet and handwrite in my votes for each office or ballot question. It is a bit of a pain to make sure you spell everything correctly and I kinda fear that if I mess it up my ballot will be rejected." –Civilian voter

"...Okay, some states allow the federal write-in absentee ballot to be used. Some states; where's the list of which state?...Well how do you know?...That should be clear." –Civilian voter

As for the counting of FWABs, some LEOs explain that FWABs are not always counted because of confusion surrounding registration. Apparently, some voters will submit a FWAB without being registered to vote, which means the LEO is unable to count the ballot.

"As of right now, we do get very few FWABs that are able to be counted; however, because they don't have anything else on file. Sometimes they are not even registered in the state." –LEO

"However, when time becomes an issue, it's not always possible, especially if they are mailing them, which is 99% of the FWABs are mailed. If they mailed it, and they mailed it you know 30 days ago and we get it 3 days before the election and we are unable to reach them by phone or e-mail or fax number, then we are kind of at a loss. We have to unfortunately follow our law regarding FWABs, which is such that if they don't have an application and weren't issued a ballot, then the ballot doesn't count." –LEO

"There is confusion over the FPCA and the FWAB because it is essentially the same document except the FWAB has the additional write in section. There was confusion over do I have to fill out the FPCA and the FWAB, or does the FWAB a combination of the FPCA and the write in ballot." –IVAO, Air Force

Online Requests

Receiving the ballot online is one of the top recommendations from both voters and actors involved with the voting process.

MILITARY

Receiving the ballot online is particularly important for military voters overseas who may not receive their ballot on time because of mail delays.

“Since it went online and you can go in and fill it out and you can kind of do it at a computer, I think that was one of the best things that’s happened.... You know when you put it in the mail and you had to mail things, it would be that you didn’t really know – did they get it, was it okay, was there a problem. You know you just didn’t know.” –IVAO, Army

“I’m definitely part of the digital age. It’s to me it’s easier for to flip this button, it’s gone, a couple of minutes later, ‘hey we got your stuff.’” –Voter, Air Force

“I have actually seen those delays happen in the mail process. So that’s one of the things I think we should do is go with an electronic system that way it makes it easier, and two, it cuts down the cost too for the DoD because they don’t have to worry about paper copies and all that stuff. It’s all electronic. It streamlines the process. It just makes it easier too.” –VAO, Marines

“Guys that are overseas, they’re gonna be hard-pressed to request the absentee ballot and typically guys overseas, particularly if they’re deployed overseas you know they’re operational tempo is pretty high and you know filling out this is probably not a priority on their list to do over there. So but everyone uses the Internet. Everyone sends e-mails to loved ones. So given that option, there’s no doubt in my mind more people would vote.” –Voter, Navy

Many military voters reported the ability to request a ballot online, and most felt this option makes voting significantly more convenient. VAOs and other actors who help UOCAVA voters often stated that requesting a ballot online has improved the process significantly.

“Everybody likes the online stuff. It is really easy. You order the stuff. Most of the states you can do it by e-mail. You get a ballot and you fill it out; you scan it; you send it back using fax or e-mail.” – Commander, Army

“Convenience. If you can do it on line or via e-mail, electronic -- in today’s society people are used to...it is a very electronic driven society. People are used to doing that. I think the days of handwriting stuff and submitting stuff is kind of yesterday.” –Voter, Navy

“It is getting better. I think that most states (not all, but most states) have gone to an online registration and an online update of location, which is very helpful for us, but ideally, the more automated we can make it, the easier it’s going to be for me to make sure everyone here can vote.” –IVAO, Navy

Ironically, however, receiving a ballot online may create the perception that voting is less important than if the ballot was received by mail. When a paper ballot arrives by mail, some voters seem to feel more urgency around “taking care of it,” while an e-mailed ballot can be ignored more easily.

“I will tell you online is maybe easier, but I think it’s also the forgotten because if you, doing what I do, I go to my computer and I prioritize things, that wouldn’t be a priority for me that day because I have a job to do. Whereas if you’re getting it in the mail and it’s sitting there that you have to physically do something with it so it makes a difference. If it comes online it’s more, I can put that aside right now. Right cause to me when it’s time to vote and stuff like this comes in the mail, it’s kind of getting something like from a lawyer to me, it has to be taken care of right away so it’s not something you procrastinate on, it’s like paying your bills.” –Voter, Army

"Paper was easier for me: it just shows up in the mailbox. Don't have to remember to go back online."
–Voter, Air Force

CIVILIANS

Like military VAOs, DOS VAOs report that receiving the ballot online removes a significant barrier to UOCAVA voting success.

"A lot of states do send their ballot through e-mail. I think if they all standardized that and have the ballots received and sent via directly to the person, it would be much easier... You know because like I said, a lot of states do accept the ballots by e-mail, but of course you do need to send the ballots again, but not all of them do it, so if they had standardized that, it would be pretty simple for the U.S. citizens abroad." –DOS VAO

However, unlike military voters, most civilian voters have never received their ballot online nor are they aware of this option.

"I don't remember that option. Like it might have been there, I just don't remember." –Civilian voter

"I don't think you could get it online. I think you could get it by fax maybe." –Civilian voter

"I first had to register with my last residence city's voting office, providing them with my former district. After that I had to mail the signed form back to the US. All of the interaction took place through mail and I did not have an option for online ballot request." –Civilian voter

Although receiving ballots online is generally perceived as an improvement and desirable, some actors who help UOCAVA voters note that not everyone is able to take advantage of this option. Older voters who are not Internet-savvy or voters in locations that do not have access to the Internet need other options. This is a barrier not as much in the military (where the population is substantially younger), but among civilians overseas.

"I understand that FVAP is trying to do everything electronically. That makes so much more sense to do everything online. At the same time that didn't work with our population... because these retirees never turned on a computer in their life, a lot of them." –DOS VAO

"We were told to push -- again making sensibly so we told to push as many people towards electronic as possible but it wasn't always possible. In theory, great; in practice, I don't know how great that is." –DOS VAO

Some voters also reported difficulty in printing the ballots and envelopes.

"Cause the thing was like an origami-type thing that you print it out and fold it up, and...I'd print something out, it had no stickiness, there's no envelope, so it's like, the sheet of paper was the envelope and you're supposed to close it up on itself or something like that." –Voter, Air Force

"Refold exactly as you received it. So if I would've printed it out I don't know where I'd fold it... Okay. So that would be confusing if it wasn't already folded. Place the ballot in the enclosed envelope, which is this. So I'd fold this?....This seems too small." –Civilian voter

"If I recall correctly, I think I can either request a paper copy of the ballot or I can print one out, but often when you print it out it doesn't print properly so usually I request a paper." –Civilian voter

Differences Among Subgroups

Not receiving a ballot while deployed was cited as a barrier more often among Army personnel than personnel in other branches.

“As soldiers in the United States, I don’t think we have concerns. As soldiers overseas, it’s a big concern, because everything is a delayed process and if you’re using a military postal service, mail gets delivered when the truck is full, for the United States. So they could sit on a plane or stay in an area for two to three weeks and a soldier would not receive it for a long time so the biggest fear for them is that their votes don’t count, because they don’t make it back in time to be counted.” –Voter, Army

Ship mail is especially slow, and submarines often lack Internet access, making requesting a ballot and receiving it nearly impossible in some cases for Navy personnel aboard ship.

“I mean I would say the Postal Service at sea has not always been the best. You know they do a decent job of getting your mail but you know if there’s a 40 to 50-day lag on your mail sometimes that’s not...doesn’t give you a lot of confidence.” –Voter, Navy

“I was at sea and mailing the form off the boat was the hard part. I am a submariner.” –Voter, Navy



Local Election Officials note that voters often make errors on the ballots that prevent them from counting the votes. VAOs and Local Election Officials also mention failure to sign the ballot (or envelope, or declaration) as a barrier to counting the ballot. When this occurs among overseas voters, reaching them in time to correct the error is sometimes difficult.

“One of the biggest things is we don’t always get an original signature. A lot of people think that they can fax or scan an e-mail of that form to us, and in Idaho it requires an original signature, which means we then have to return the form or get a hold of the person and have them submit the original form.” –LEO

“None relating necessarily to technology. Perhaps laws that are somehow misunderstand or misconstrued particularly like regarding the signatures on the applications for the ballots for military and overseas voters. I believe that some people are reading that they do not have to physically sign them and that an electronic signature would be the same, and it’s unfortunately not, at least in this state.” –LEO

LEOs vary in their efforts to seek out UOCAVA voters who made mistakes on their ballot. Part of the variation is related to resources, capacity, and information (whether or not they have a means to contact the voter). Other times, the variation is related to dedication to UOCAVA voters and the voting process.

“The only other issue where a ballot wouldn’t be counted is sometimes in voting by mail, in particular, the signature line on the outside of the envelope is not signed. The law does indicate that you do have to have a signed application and a signed affidavit with the ballot. So if they did not sign that affidavit, that ballot would be rejected. We do our best...if I receive a ballot and there is time, I reissue another ballot to get that signature from the voter.” –LEO

LEOs also report difficulty in reaching UOCAVA voters who have made mistakes on their ballots, especially when the voter is overseas. As a result, voters are often not informed of these problems with their ballots, which could easily lead to the same errors and vote failures being repeated in the next election.

“Well it would depend on when we get one in the mail. If they have an e-mail address, we could get a hold of them that way or by phone. You know hopefully they have provided that information. If not, then basically we have to return it.” –LEO

MILITARY

LEOs also report that military members are often difficult to reach because their address and phone numbers change so rapidly.

“That’s probably our biggest challenge is trying to track down the ones that you know we send out and we get them returned and then they call and ask, ‘Well you know where’s my ballot?’ I know I asked for one at the beginning of the year.” –LEO

Some LEOs expressed the desire for more communication with military and embassy administration, especially people who could act as liaisons to the voters they cannot reach by other means:

“I think for ____ it would be nice if we did have a contact or assistance with this process and that. I know in the past someone who had done work with the UOCAVA voters tried to find a local contact and were unable to do so. So if there was someplace we could go to or find out who locally in the area that we could get a hold of to help us with these people who get to vote that would be nice.” –LEO

Military voters, however, report few problems when it comes to filling out the ballot. This is a disconnect that negatively affects voting success rates—while LEOs report a slew of problems concerning filling out the ballot, voters are unaware of mistakes they have made, nor are they aware of the opportunity or chance of vote failure because of mistakes filling out the ballot. Many mention that they sometimes do not feel informed enough to make a decision about the down-ballot races or some of the propositions, referenda, etc., but this does not preclude them from actually casting the ballot.

“The paper ballot is a little, a little confusing just because like I know who the major guys are, but the local candidates I don’t really know who those are.” –Voter, Air Force

“And then of course on these it’s written by a lawyer so I mean it’s...it’s not always easy to understand. You have to probably read it a couple times and you know maybe do a little more research to make sure you understand what the effects of your yes and no vote are.” –Voter, Navy

Still, observations of voters reviewing the election material they would have received during the 2012 elections reveal sources of potential error. Most commonly, voters either skip directions or do not read them carefully. Some voters even admit to this:

*“I don’t know if I, I don’t know if I remember, uh, reading about do not staple it or anything or maybe I just didn’t read it. Sometimes I skip directions, but I think I felt I just knew what to do, I think.”
–Military spouse, Air Force*

CIVILIANS

Like military voters, civilian voters report few problems when it comes to filling out the ballot.

“It was straightforward.” –Civilian voter

“I can’t think of any problems.” –Civilian voter

But like military members, some civilians admit to not fully reading instructions. Voters assume they know what they are doing because they have voted absentee before, but this assumption is often erroneous because of the many changes that happen with the UOCAVA voting process.

Moderator: *“So there are all these instructions there, but you didn’t feel like you needed the instructions, it was very clear what you needed to do?”*

Participant: *“Yeah just because I voted before and I was familiar with ballots.” –Civilian voter*

A barrier specific to civilian overseas voters is that some jurisdictions require the signature of a witness. Because the witness has to be an American citizen, some voters are not able to easily find a person to sign.

“Sometimes, like just as an example, I’ve been to a couple places where people say, “Oh yeah, I had to get a witness to sign my ballot.” In addition to their signature they had to find a U.S. citizen to sign it as a witness. And some people had problems with that because they weren’t around U.S. citizens a lot. But some places like _____ I don’t think requires something like that.” –Civilian voter



Mail delays are cited by a number of actors as a major cause of vote failure among UOCAVA voters. Overseas voters are particularly hampered by mail delays. In fact, the very notion that mail delays occur or that mail systems are unreliable serve as demotivating factors that sometimes discourage UOCAVA voters from sending their ballot in. Some voters commented that they felt there was no point to mailing their ballot, because they didn't believe it would arrive on time or at all. Although mail delays also occur during the request and reception of the ballot, this barrier is much more significant when it comes to sending the ballot since sending a completed ballot online is not an option in many jurisdictions.

"Anything could happen with the mail. When it goes overseas airplanes crash, --- get lost. Mail just gets distributed to the wrong locations. I mean it's a piece of material that's handled by human beings." –Voter, Army

"So of course changing the law so that at least blank ballots can be disseminated electronically is helpful in alleviating some of the mail challenge, but still returning the completed ballot continues to be a challenge for them for getting it in by the deadline in most states." –NGO

"If I'm voting absentee say November or October 15th or whatever it may be and my ballot shows up end of November and they've already declared the winner... what good is my ballot?" –Voter, Navy

Trust of Mail Systems

MILITARY

Some active duty members and military spouses report a distrust of the military APO system and prefer to send their ballots via the postal system in their OCONUS location. But the majority say just the opposite and prefer the APO system.

"There's no tracking, once, once it hits the military hands back up to the post, the regular post in, in the United States there's no tracking. It goes into this limbo status so and that's why one-day I can ship something and it can take two weeks for the letter and the next day it can take four weeks." –Military spouse, Air Force

"Many people choose to use APO because we can send, we get more perks. We can send from APO to APO for free. We can send APO to the states on dollar prices, not [foreign currency] prices. So all we have to do is go to our post office and take care of all of our mailing there." –Military spouse, Air Force

"I just assumed that when it goes in the military mail I just trust that the mail system works." –Voter, Navy

"Dropped mail off at post office. Wife is concerned with privacy about leaving items with PII in household mailbox." –Voter, Army

Unlike their active duty member spouses, military spouses are restricted in their ability to access military post locations. Some report having to drive to the central post location where they can drop outgoing mail.

"Yeah, it's...there is just a couple of miles between, [Base] and [Base], so to drive from [Base] and [Base] is, I think it's maybe between three and five miles, like just a couple of miles away. And, once you're on the base, the post office is a mile away from the main gate." –Military spouse, Air Force

CIVILIANS

Civilians tend to struggle even more than military personnel when it comes to trust of mail systems. However, this is very much dependent on location. While voters in some countries completely trust the mail system and report few delays, voters in other countries report major problems with the mail system and consistently lack confidence that their mail gets delivered to the U.S.

“Even if I got a confirmation, I still need to have faith that my ballot was counted. I trust the postal service to deliver the package.” –**Civilian voter**

“The post works so badly that they have a lot of private companies that they work...that they are private; like OCA or some other ---. You have all different...like 10 or 15 companies that they work...and they have messengers. Sometimes they send you the mail via like a guy on a bike; like the bank, because it's so dangerous. If they are sending you like a credit card, a renewal, they send it to you with a courier.”
–**Civilian voter**

“I remember that at first I thought I would be able to use an absentee ballot and then I realized pretty quickly that it's hard to...that mail is not that dependable here.” –**Civilian voter**

Misinformation

MILITARY

Certain myths surround this part of the voting process and also act as barriers. In the military, many voters believe that either their ballot won't count once it arrives, or that it will not actually make it to its destination.

“I think most people here -- and this is just my opinion -- well I'm just not even going to worry about it because the perception is absentee ballots don't count. They arrive too late for consideration, etc. They are lost. Everyone hears horror stories. No one feels like it is worth their time to even pursue even if they would like to.” –**IVAO, Air Force**

“Most of my counterparts no longer believe their vote counts so why do it?” –**Voter, Navy**

“You hear stories of absentee ballots being disqualified for one reason or another and if I failed to do one thing will my vote be thrown out?” –**Voter, Air Force**

“Whenever we have any kind of voting rep come, that's exactly the argument that goes around the table is that, alright, people that complain usually are people that don't vote. They'll sit there and say, ‘I don't understand why they don't do this,’ and like, ‘well, who'd you vote for?’ ‘I didn't vote for anybody. My vote doesn't really count.’”
– **Voter, Army**

This perception is exaggerated among OCONUS voters who feel more disconnected from the U.S. and find it hard to believe that their ballot will make it all the way back home on time and will actually be counted.

“I find that a lot of people feel voting is too much of a hassle and their vote doesn't count. This hinders the process.” –**Voter, Marines**

“But the voting is just, it's just kind of a different environment because in the states you go to the booth and you know you watch the polls online and where's it going...but you know out here everybody does it ahead of time, so for us; it's just kind of weird to watch the polls then... I would say it's sort of disconnected; feeling disconnected.” –**Voter, Air Force**

The myth that votes are not counted spans across the military, though enlisted members are somewhat more likely to believe this myth than officers. Part of the reason for this is experience—officers are more likely to have voted before and been successful. However, since many enlisted members are younger and often voting for the first time, it is particularly important to squash this myth among enlisted members, who also perpetuate this myth amongst each other.

CIVILIANS

The feeling of being disconnected applies to federal employees and civilians abroad as well.

“It kinda felt like I was sending it into a black hole... When you’re at the ballot box, there is a physical part where I am putting it in.” –Voter, federal employee

“I just printed it and sent it and I hope that, (short laugh) someone received it and it was counted.”
–Civilian voter

Additionally, many DOS VAOs reported that some civilian voters are under the impression that they can bring their filled-out ballot to the embassy on the day of the U.S. election and cast their ballot there. Some civilians simply show up to the embassy on Election Day and expect to be able to vote at an actual voting booth.

“Everybody wanted to vote even on the day of the election they still came to the consulate wanting to know [inaudible] whether that will be counted is another story but even on the day of the elections people still brought ballots to us.” –DOS VAO

“Most of them think that the date of elections they can just come and vote at the Embassy.” –DOS VAO

“I have a lot of friends from you know they are from other countries that are here and they all just say; oh, you can’t go to the Embassy? Why not?” –Civilian voter

This misperception might be exacerbated by the fact that some embassies do offer in-person assistance with ballots. Some civilian voters even cited “ballot parties,” where American citizens are invited to the embassy on a specific day for help filling out their ballot and sending. While this in-person assistance is important and a positive development, it is important to make clear to voters that simply coming to the embassy on Election Day to vote is not the correct process.

“Somebody told me I could go to the embassy. And I feel like I got on some sort of mailing list or something where people started sending...where I got like reminders from the embassy that when was the cutoff date that we have to go. Or maybe there was only one day that we could go. I can’t remember...I know that the first time I did it I actually went to the embassy and I like filled out a ballot there...they had like a little party.”
–Civilian voter

“In all of the embassies where I have served, you always have those people showing up at the Embassy on Election Day who think that they can vote at the Embassy.” –DOS VAO

Some civilian voters report confusion about their very eligibility to vote.

“I think can I vote absentee. Like it seems like that should be front and center because I think that’s...a lot of people think like you know you hear a rumor like if you haven’t lived in the U.S. for a certain number of years you can’t vote; or if you’re a citizen by you know your parents but you’ve never lived in the U.S...like you can’t vote.” –Civilian voter

“I just want a really straightforward answer that says yes, if you’re a citizen you can 100% vote. It seems like really important information. Like once you know that then maybe you would put in the time to figure out the other important confusing details, but it’s kind of buried on the third page.” –Civilian voter

Perception that Absentee Votes Don't Count

Several voters and UOCAVA actors reported the perception that absentee votes do not count, and many connected this perception to demotivation. Some of this perception is related to misinformation about the counting of absentee and overseas ballots.

MILITARY

Many military service members believe that absentee votes do not count and express a lack of confidence in voting absentee because of this perception.

"You just get more confidence when you go pull the lever I think." –Voter, Navy

"I mean the absentee ballots are not counted unless needed has always been the word." –Voter, Navy

Moderator: *"Do you remember questions you got for anyone else?"*

Participant: *"One particular uh that stands out is; does the ballots even get voted being overseas? Does it count? ... and I actually looked online too, I called and it says; they all gets counted depending on the state."* –VAO, Air Force

"I think most people here -- and this is just my opinion -- well I'm just not even going to worry about it because the perception is absentee ballots don't count. They arrive too late for consideration, etc. They are lost. Everyone hears horror stories. No one feels like it is worth their time to even pursue even if they would like to." –IVAO, Air Force

In our research, we tested different communication strategies to overcome this myth. One such strategy involved telling voters that Local Election Officials are required by law to count every ballot and that the DOD is dedicated to ensuring every absentee ballot counts. However, this message was met with mixed reactions. While some voters responded well to what they perceived as the "facts" of the situation, others responded negatively and either didn't believe the message, or said it made them feel ever more worried about their ballots not counting.

"It just tells and there was nothing else behind it and just hollow words is what I get out of it. And that's my problem with it; you can tell me all day long what I want to hear; but it doesn't really tell you that, this is why it's going to happen." –Voter, Marines

"Agree with all of it, but if you are deployed it's a matter a faith that you believe your vote is being counted." –Voter, Navy

"I'm not concerned that votes aren't counted. If they don't want to, they won't even if they are 'required' to." –Voter, Army

CIVILIANS

Civilians also believe their votes do not count.

"Well there's a lot of rumors that the votes come in too late to do any good. You know by the time they get there everything is already decided from the voting." –Civilian voter

"I get the sense that an absentee ballot from abroad is only counted as a last resort if the election is especially close. That was discouraging but I never looked up if this is true or not." –Civilian voter

LEOs do not seem to communicate the fact that absentee ballots are counted generally speaking, just not when there is an error or something that disqualified the ballot. This distinction is important, but it is often not communicated.

And like military voters, civilian voters also did not respond well to information about Local Election Officials being required to count absentee ballots. Reassuring voters that their ballots did in fact count did not work very well, mostly because voters either didn't believe it or felt even more skeptical. It seemed to exacerbate cynicism overseas civilians may already feel.

"I like the statement are required to count every legal absentee ballot because that also...it busted a myth. However, it kind of negated it by saying local officials are working hard to ensure my voice is heard. That means that they haven't done it." –**Civilian voter**

"First of all, I don't think local election officials work hard, especially for overseas voters." –**Civilian voter**

Sending Completed Ballots Online

A number of actors involved in the voting process as well as the voters themselves note that the ability to send in the ballot online (by e-mailing it to their Local Election Official) would ensure that more people can vote successfully. Some states do accept a scanned and e-mailed ballot, but voters are not usually aware of this option.

"Well it's probably stating the obvious that the postal service, whatever country it is, even the United States, is not the way of the future, and we are feeling that already from our customers. Really, I am over here, we have the internet, you can't get me my stuff and have me send it back? I just want to vote. I should be able to do that. So I don't think traditional mail processes are going to sit well with people forever until you might get some really hard pushback of people saying we should not be doing this this way." –**LEO**

MILITARY

Casting ballots online might especially help military personnel who are stationed overseas in remote locations and have limited access to mail.

"Well [being able to vote online] would make it easier to vote from overseas because right now I have to take the ballot, fill it out and then mail it back in. A lot of people don't mail stuff in nowadays so it's not something they're really thinking about doing." –**Voter, Air Force**

"It was that the more automated they could make it, the more user-friendly in terms of the Internet, that it would make it so much easier for folks overseas to be able to vote or people...like on a ship you don't get mail all the time." –**IVAO, Navy**

"I agree...Because there wouldn't be all this paperwork. I think so [that paperwork deters people]. I mean, if you know, all you have to do is go online, enter your information and vote." –**Military spouse, Army**

CIVILIANS

Many civilians also noted that being able to cast their ballots online would improve the voting process greatly. This is especially true among UOCAVA-eligible voters.

“Yeah and if it gets there but maybe...you know it, and then if it doesn’t get there on time, is it really being counted? You know there’s too many what ifs about it. And at least on-line there is a reply.”

–UOCAVA-eligible voter

“If you can secure banking on line there has to be a way to secure voting on line.” –UOCAVA-eligible voter

“Well it’s right there in front of you, you download it and it’s in front of you so you have a tendency to use it, vote, and then send it back.” –Civilian voter



Many voters as well as the actors who help them vote stress the importance of receiving confirmation that ballots are received and counted. In fact, not receiving confirmation or at least the perception that there is no way of confirming the ballot was actually received has a de-mobilizing effect.

Concern about the fates of voted ballots spans across subgroups. Service members, spouses, and overseas civilians all express doubts as to whether their votes were counted and say they would feel more confident if they received some sort of confirmation.

CIVILIANS

To civilians voting absentee from abroad, the voting process can feel like sending a ballot into a black hole. They go through the motions, but are uncertain if their efforts produce the intended results.

"It kinda felt like I was sending it into a black hole and maybe it counted and maybe it didn't."

–Voter, federal employee

"I got the same feeling. Actually the exact same feeling with; did I vote? And I went back for the receipt; where's my receipt?" –Civilian voter

"I never actually got neither confirmation or any information that any notice that there was a problem with my vote, never. I never got that. I would feel better if I did, if I got confirmation of your vote is, we got your, we received your vote correctly and it counted." –Civilian voter

"There's no way that you can get these guys, these state people to confirm that the votes are counted."

–Civilian voter

Actors who help UOCAVA voters also feel frustrated by not being able to provide a confirmation:

"That is another thing [inaudible] us knowing that the ballots were received because we date stamp the envelope as it is dropped off at the consulate and then take it to the mailroom; when the ballot is received we don't know that. We don't have anybody coming back to us saying that you sent this batch of [inaudible] ballots for 10 different states. We have received them [in the state]. That's the only thing that we don't receive."

–DOS VAO

MILITARY

Military service members and their dependents also lack confidence that their votes are actually received and counted; these are doubts that confirmation could dispel.

Moderator: *"What's your biggest concern about voting absentee?"*

Participant: *"Knowing my vote actually gets there and counts."* –Voter, Air Force

"I mean I hope it's being counted, like I said, I've never received a confirmation that it was or was not counted so it's all on faith and hope, so..." –Voter, Air Force

"I was a little concerned, because you have to mail it back... I was worried that maybe they wouldn't count it or they didn't get it in time or... because there's no tracking. Like, you don't know, hey, we received your ballot, like you don't get any information back." –Military spouse, Army

Although a handful of voters reported receiving confirmation from their LEOs that their ballot had been received, this is the exception rather than the norm. Likewise, while a few LEOs report sending confirmation of receipt of the ballot as a standard practice, most do not, and many indicate they would need a change in state law or at least an additional budget allocation to consider such a step. LEOs are more likely to send a confirmation when the voter provides an e-mail address.

CIVILIANS

Among the few civilian voters who did receive a confirmation, they either received it automatically from their county without requesting it, or contacted their county to inquire if their ballot was received. A handful are aware of being able to check the status of their ballot online.

"You don't necessarily get a confirmation letter, whether you voted or not, unless you call them directly... which I did. It said don't worry, you voted." –Civilian voter

"I live in a small town of 12,000 people and they're excellent... I think I sent them an e-mail. And then they said, 'Yes, don't worry. We got yours.'" –Civilian voter

"I was told in the last election that you can trace the...where your ballot is somehow on the internet and I got the impression that if I wanted, since I have the address, I could e-mail my county registrar and find out if they received my ballot or other people could e-mail or get in touch." –Civilian voter

MILITARY

A handful of military voters also reported successful attempts to track their ballots.

"I get the full election results and they have a webpage that lists every ballot I ever sent in and the day they received it." –Voter, Air Force

Many reported less successful attempts to confirm their votes were received and counted.

"Sometimes I'll get a little card saying: we've received your thing. There's only one time I didn't get it and they go; well we mailed you one, but your thing didn't get to us." –Voter, Air Force

"You know I never did get a confirmation and maybe because I didn't go back and look at it... I went to tracking to try to look and see where it was, what is was doing. But then I kind of stopped following it because there was nothing I was gonna be able to do about it anyway." –Voter, Navy

CIVILIANS

Some civilian voters also report inconsistent communication from their local election offices or negative experiences, such as broken links, in their attempts to track their ballots.

"They send you an e-mail saying that they have received your ballot and if you want to check the status as to whether or not it's been counted or received and counted they give you a link, but you click on the link and it's a dead end." –Civilian voter

"It's on the website I was looking at. It seemed like, to make sure that your ballot was received put in your number or something, but we didn't have the right number; it was not corresponding." –Civilian voter

“So here’s my voting history. It says I voted in a partisan primary 2008, in the presidential and general election in 2008, and then in the general election 2010... So I’ve missed 2012 and apparently I don’t get primaries and stuff anymore because I haven’t seen that again... so even that one when it did record that I had voted. It’s still, they say that they got it late, you know.” –**Civilian voter**

MILITARY

Most voters and VAOs are unaware of the military ballot tracking system. We observed that many voters were surprised that the “track your ballot” option exists on the FVAP.gov website. Almost none had previously seen this feature nor had used it.

“If you dropped off your ballot with me and I promise to mail it and then a week or 2 weeks goes by, you are going to call me and ask me if my state received my ballot. I don’t know that because nobody confirms.”
–**DOS VAO**

“My only problem with sending it in the mail is that there’s never a confirmation of receipt.” –**Voter, Navy**

“There is nothing in place that lets you know they received or counted your vote.” –**Voter, Army**

“I mean it would be cool if there was some sort of tracking for like; hey we received your ballot, even if it was just something like that... to find out that they actually received your vote would be kind of cool.”
–**Voter, Air Force**

“I never really stopped and put a delivery confirmation on it. I don’t even know if that would work... I mean everyone has that option when you mail something you could always, for what is it \$0.80 or whatever; you can put a delivery confirmation, slap it in a priority envelope and I could pay my extra little, however much the mailing for delivery confirmation on it.” –**Military spouse, Army**

“Unless you send certified mail -- but you still never know if the vote got ‘added’ or trashed -- you never never know.” –**Voter, Air Force**

CIVILIANS

Civilians living abroad also like the idea of online tracking and confirmation.

“I would like to vote by electronic means, and receive a meaningful, trustworthy confirmation that my ballot has been received and counted.” –**Civilian voter**

“It would be neat if it actually tells you each step of the way where your vote’s at. Oh it’s at your state now. Now it’s at the county. I mean it would be that you would have this confidence that it’s actually there and you know it’s there and you know what process it’s at along the way.” –**Civilian voter**

“I really like how you can check the status of your own ballot, a concern that a lot of people here talked about.” –**UOCAVA-eligible voter**

The lack of a confirmation perpetuates the myth discussed above about military or overseas votes not counting. Because voters are unsure if their vote actually got counted, this skepticism seems to uphold the idea that their votes are somehow “second class” and may not count. Ensuring that voters can get a confirmation may reduce belief in the idea that these votes do not count, and thus improve motivation.

“I wish I knew whether my vote was counted or not. I still don’t know if absentee votes have a second-class status in determining an election outcome.” –**Civilian voter**

"I'm a little discouraged... we do extra effort/cost with sending international express, but don't know if it arrived on time/was counted." –**Civilian voter**

"Maybe it's just my county, but they don't actually count the absentee ballots if the win is wide enough...It actually says on my ballot that like yours won't even be opened if...if it doesn't meet like the margin...I've never had a confirmation. I mean it makes sense mathematically but like it's a little bit like you know asking people to vote and then explicitly saying that we might not even count your vote." –**Civilian voter**

"You send this off and you just, you know, you have no confirmation that it ever even makes it... You know, in a day and age where you click, you get a confirmation number... This is pretty old school... How important are we when we have such a system that's not really user friendly?" –**UOCAVA-eligible voter**

MILITARY

Military voters would also be more motivated to vote if they had more confidence that their votes would be counted. The perception that votes are not being counted has a demobilizing effect.

"I think that would help to make sure ... that our military members overseas who are actually fighting for that privilege actually know that for a fact that their vote is going to actually count... Some kind of confirmation that yeah their vote was received and that it is going to count towards the election because I know they've got a lot of members pissed off in Afghanistan and their votes they didn't think counted." – **Military VAO**

Some actors involved in the UOCAVA voting process buy into this myth themselves—it is essential to educate not only voters, but actors who assist UOCAVA voters as well. Although rare, some actors have acknowledged this widespread myth and have taken action to send the message that overseas votes do count:

"So you know people worry sometimes that their votes don't count and that kind of stuff. So I used some of the slides and showed the _____ ...and we are talking 2,000 people...I showed them some of those slides to show hey yeah your vote does matter. So we have done some campaigns to encourage voters to just register (one) and get out there and to vote." –**IVAO, Air Force**

Military and Civilians

Across constituencies, confirmation that votes are received and counted is voters' number one suggestion for how to improve the absentee voting process.

"If they have to do paper ballots then have some kind of confirmation. I like confirmation. I like knowing if it went to the right thing." –**Military spouse, Army**

"Maybe a secure upload of the ballot where you get some kind of confirmation that it is uploaded and it is going directly into whatever system." –**Voter, federal employee**

"They could improve by sending out an e-mail, a short e-mail message saying we received your ballot... all they have to do is just simply say received. Received ballot. Two words." –**Civilian voter**

To be motivated to vote, voters need to be confident their votes will count:

"I do believe it counts, that's why I keep on playing every time." –**Voter, Navy**



Summary: Overcoming Barriers and Research Directions



The previous section included detailed findings related to the barriers that inhibit UOCAVA voting success. This section offers recommendations for overcoming these barriers and increasing success rates. While many of the barriers identified affect all UOCAVA voters, some of these recommendations specifically apply to military personnel, family members, or civilians.

Finding new ways to communicate with voters and motivate them to begin the process early enough to be successful

This research showed that without the necessary “triggers” that motivate voters to begin the voting process, many will start too late or not at all, even though they do wish to vote and probably would if they could cast a ballot at the polls. While many actors who help UOCAVA voters make strong efforts to communicate with voters and send the message to start the process early, this message is not penetrating far enough. Overseas military personnel, their families, and overseas civilians especially need this outreach, for two reasons:

- 1) They need more time to complete the process due to mail delays; and**
- 2) They are more disconnected from the U.S. and are unlikely to receive a trigger organically.**

This research, identified in-person resources as an effective way to communicate and assist military voters and their family members. Some installations reported setting up tables and booths prior to the election in order to encourage voters to fill out the FPCA, check their registration status, and generally receive more information about how to vote. Many voters relayed that because they are constantly bombarded with e-mails, communications about voting assistance are often missed or ignored. While e-mail communication and outreach should continue, in-person assistance is a superior way to communicate with voters and offer assistance.

Military family members rely heavily on their family members for information about the process, so it is important to continually remind active duty members to forward the information to their families. Equally as important is the message that military dependents living abroad follow the same absentee voting process as military personnel. Reaching out to spouses directly through other military programs may also be an effective strategy. Military spouses report interacting with the Family Readiness Programs on base frequently, and seem to trust these programs as sources of information. Because spouses also sometimes act as organic VAOs to their active duty family members and their peers, it is critical to reach this population.

FVAP should also continue its digital outreach. The opportunity exists to more fully leverage Facebook (preferred by users over Twitter) as a platform for not only disseminating FVAP’s messages on a regular basis, but also for engaging with other users (e.g., sharing posts by partners that advance FVAP’s messaging, and encouraging followers to repost these). Military and civilian bloggers that have been active with FVAP can be encouraged to continue and even increase their activity by feeding them messages, new ads and other information on a regular basis.

On the civilian side, the best practices we observed at embassies involve incorporating voting into other transactions, such as passport renewal or other tasks Americans might complete through the U.S. embassy—as well as e-mail outreach through STEP. However, additional outreach to U.S. citizens who are not regularly interacting with the embassy is also needed, early enough to provide the needed trigger to begin the voting process.



FVAP might also consider new and innovative ways to reach younger and first-time voters, including text messages, social media, and smart phone applications. Military personnel and civilians both noted a desire for digital solutions (smart phone app, mobile-enabled website) from FVAP that would provide a one-stop shop for people to: sign-up for reminders, register to vote, get information about candidates and legislative measures, and to receive confirmations that ballots and registration forms are received.

For many, there is a nostalgia associated with voting in person. Civilians expressed some interest in being able to vote in person at their local embassy, while military members talked about the potential for polling stations at central and highly trafficked locations on base such as at legal offices, finance offices and the library. Where feasible, this method could quell concerns about whether a vote is received, and perhaps reduce concerns about whether a vote is counted. Also, some civilian voters talked about voting “parties” occurring at embassies, where U.S. citizens would get together to fill out their ballots, with the help of embassy staff. Civilian voters often yearn for the feeling of connection with the U.S., and getting together with other U.S. citizens to vote very much taps into their values of American patriotism and civic duty.

Increasing awareness of the Voting Assistance Program and resources

A lesson learned from this research is that many military voters are unaware of the VAO system and resources. While some voters have had successful and positive experiences working with their VAOs, this is not a consistent pattern across installations. Much of VAO awareness is related to the culture of the installation. Generally speaking, on installations in which commanders are actively and visibly supportive of voting and the VAO program, this attitude tends to trickle down to the IVAO and VAOs.

Creating more proactive and energetic VAO programs likely requires starting at the top, with the military leaders. FVAP may need to strengthen relationships with the commanders and other installation leaders to get them on board and supportive of the VAO program. We found that some commanders who knew the statistics on voting success rates of military voters were more motivated to do something to correct that and ensure that military voters were able to exercise their right to vote.

There also needs to be more seamlessness in VAO succession. Many VAOs reported “starting from scratch” once they were appointed, with no instructions or guidance from the VAOs who preceded them. Although continuity folders are required in the program, this guideline is rarely being followed. Whenever possible, VAOs should be personnel who are planning to stay stationed on that particular installation for the long-term. Or, at a minimum, encouraging a succession planning so that VAOs can share information with their successor prior to being reassigned. This allows VAOs to establish relationships with the voters and learn their job. We have seen that lower rates of turnover at the embassies have positive effects on the VAO program—voting staff who have been through several election cycles are much more knowledgeable about the voting process as well as more actively engaged.

Civilians are largely unaware of the existence of Department of State VAOs. There is a disconnect in that DOS VAOs report active outreach to civilians, yet this communication is not penetrating. Voters also do not immediately think of the embassy as a place to access voting information. The embassy should find new ways to reach civilian voters, by perhaps incorporating voting information in other embassy transactions. Creative outreach at venues frequented by U.S. citizens, like schools, bars and cafes, may also be effective.



The resources that already exist can be improved. On the military side, the most common complaint is that FVAP resources are too long, dense with copy, and are not streamlined. Many military members report the desire for short e-mails that contain bullet points with the most essential information. Conveying specific contact information in prominent locations is also very important—the FVAP posters include contact information for the VAO or FVAP in small letters at the bottom of the poster, and many voters do not notice this essential information.

FVAP should also be cognizant that due to look, feel and sometimes word choices, many civilians interpret FVAP resources to be applicable only to military members, not to them. Producing resources highlight the wide range of overseas voters served by FVAP might help dispel this myth.

Dispelling myths about the process

Misinformation is a key source of vote failure among UOCAVA voters. Many are under the impression that absentee ballots are not counted except in rare circumstances, and this perception is demotivating. Even voters who go as far as requesting and receiving a ballot sometimes will not mail it back because of this perception. FVAP needs to find ways to dispel these myths and equip voters with information that assures them their votes are being counted.

We found in this research that simply telling voters that absentee ballots are required by law to be counted is not enough to dispel this myth. A more indirect, but possibly better solution, is to incorporate confirmations as part of the voting process. The message that local election officials are counting every legal absentee ballot received should be regularly disseminated and wherever possible reinforced with stories through the media and social media in addition to the website, especially sharing examples of how a tight election depended on absentee ballots to determine the winner.

On the civilian side, some voters are under the impression they can vote at the embassy on Election Day. Correcting this perception is a matter of clearer and more proactive communication on the part of embassies, perhaps by incorporating voting information into other transactions, as suggested above.

Building organic VAO opportunities

Many opportunities to use organic VAOs to improve voter success exist but are not well-utilized. Most significantly, actors who communicate with overseas voters, such as HR managers, study abroad leaders, and NGOs, are an untapped resource. These actors have regular communications with potential UOCAVA voters, but are not delivering information about voting. However, many are willing to do so. FVAP should make an active effort to build relationships with these actors and provide them with resources they can then distribute to their constituencies.

The best way to utilize organic VAOs is to have them incorporate voting information in communications they are already delivering to their constituencies. For example, study abroad leaders often meet with their students and provide them with packets of information prior to their trip departure. They deliver information about finding housing abroad, provide forms for banking, and other support that someone might need while living overseas. Voting information could easily be incorporated into these communications.

Another type of organic VAO identified through this research are voters themselves. In the military especially, officers with voting experience often both encourage and support lower ranking members, sometimes even organizing informal meetings to fill out the FPCA together, or individually walking voters through their ballot



request. FVAP might consider reaching out to these organic VAO voters and provide them with materials and resources that they could distribute to other voters.

Military family members also often act as organic VAOs to their active duty family members. Some family members reported receiving information from the Family Readiness Center when they arrived at their new base. This could be an opportunity to include voting information that family members themselves can use and also pass to their active duty member.

Importance of receiving a confirmation: increasing awareness of the ballot tracking system

Receiving confirmations throughout the voting process is apparently strongly related to voting success. Voters want to know if their registration went through, if their ballot request was received, and if their ballot reached their local voting jurisdiction. Many voters reported the desire to receive confirmations, including some who called this their top recommendation to improve UOCAVA voting. These confirmations are essential to keeping voters motivated throughout the process, and also work to dispel myths about their votes not being counted. However, most voters report receiving no confirmations, and many are unaware of the ballot tracking system available through FVAP.

Besides more actively promoting the ballot tracking system, FVAP might also provide voters with other ideas for how to receive a confirmation. Some voters report being able to track their ballot via their county website, and others report directly calling their county to make sure their ballot was received. Making voters aware of these options to check the status of their ballots might be useful, as well as reinforcing this through communications such as social media, newsletters and stories on the website.

Communicating with LEOs about the importance of sending confirmations is also important. Some LEOs report sending a postcard confirmation or e-mailing voters that their ballot was received. However, this is not standard practice and varies widely by county. Educating LEOs about the importance of confirmation might encourage more counties to incorporate confirmations as part of their routine in handling overseas and UOCAVA ballots.

Increasing online access and use

Completing parts of the voting process online is not only convenient for voters, but it also addresses two cause of vote failure—mail delays and mistakes filling out forms. For overseas voters, the ability to complete at least some parts of the voting process online is critical to success. Alerting voters to this option is important—many voters, especially civilians, are unaware that the FPCA is available online or that ballots can be received via e-mail. There should also be a push to have Local Election Officials post clear information on their websites, including links to forms and other resources.

However, online access to the voting process is not a panacea, and involves separate challenges that need to be addressed. Some voters reported feeling less confident receiving or sending ballots online. To these voters, receiving a ballot online diminishes its importance, seemingly downgrading the ballot to just another e-mail. Sending the ballot online can also reduce confidence that the vote was counted. Some voters reported feeling like transmitting their ballot via e-mail or online was like sending their ballot into a black hole. To be sure, voters also relayed similar feelings about sending their ballot via mail, especially in overseas countries where the mail system was inefficient or untrustworthy. Again, confirmation that the ballot was received would help ameliorate this problem.



Educating and informing first-time voters about the process and where to start

Focusing outreach on first-time voters is critical, as these voters are most likely to fail. Many first-time and younger voters reported a sense of having no idea where to begin—the first step is not an obvious one. Many actors who help UOCAVA voters reported that directing voters to FVAP.gov as the first step is a successful strategy. Communicating to voters that FVAP.gov is where they should begin the voting process may be helpful. Although FVAP has tried to deliver that message to voters, it is not penetrating enough, as most voters cannot easily recall what FVAP is or if they have used the website.

Although future research should explore different branding and outreach models for FVAP, findings from the communications audit at the start of this research work provide some guidance on easy to make initial adjustments. FVAP's unique value—"as a one-stop shop for American citizens to cast and return an absentee ballot from anywhere in the world" can be emphasized in all communications, almost as a slogan or tagline. Wherever possible, inconsistencies in how FVAP presents itself in its materials should be addressed: the presence versus absence of a tagline, using the same descriptive text as boilerplate and always ensuring that FVAP.gov is accompanied by the program's logo and full name. Finally, editing tools such as the Frequently Asked Questions, and even redesigning them to make them easier to scan, will make information more accessible to FVAP.gov visitors.

Assistance in compliance with local requirements for completed ballot

While many actors who assist UOCAVA voters will point voters in the right direction, it is rare for a VAO to directly assist voters in filling out their ballots. However, mistakes are sometimes made on ballots, such as omitting a signature or failing to obtain a witness. Most voters perceive the completion of the ballot as quite easy and are unaware they are committing these errors. At least reminding voters of specific state and county requirements for completing their ballot – particularly the required signature(s) - would be a helpful way to prevent vote failure.

Also, while LEOs believe they are providing enough comprehensive information and instructions to voters, this guidance is not penetrating among voters. Some voters even admit to skipping over instructions. Rather than chalk this pattern up to a deficiency and oversight on the part of the individual voter, LEOs could try to improve the simplicity and clarity of this information. Some voters reported that the directions are too long and could be streamlined. Sending reminders with the most pertinent information (e.g. the deadline, need for a signature, etc.) might help the information resonate.

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