

# U.S. CITIZENS ABROAD AND THEIR VOTING BEHAVIORS IN 2020

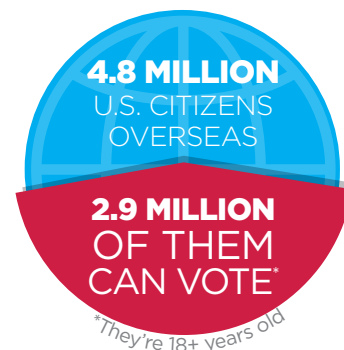
## OVERSEAS CITIZEN POPULATION ANALYSIS SUMMARY BRIEF

U.S. citizens can vote even when living abroad. To learn more about this group and help its members navigate the absentee voting process, the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) sponsors the Overseas Citizen Population Analysis (OCPA) after each federal election cycle to meet its federal requirement for a statistical analysis of overseas citizen participation rates.

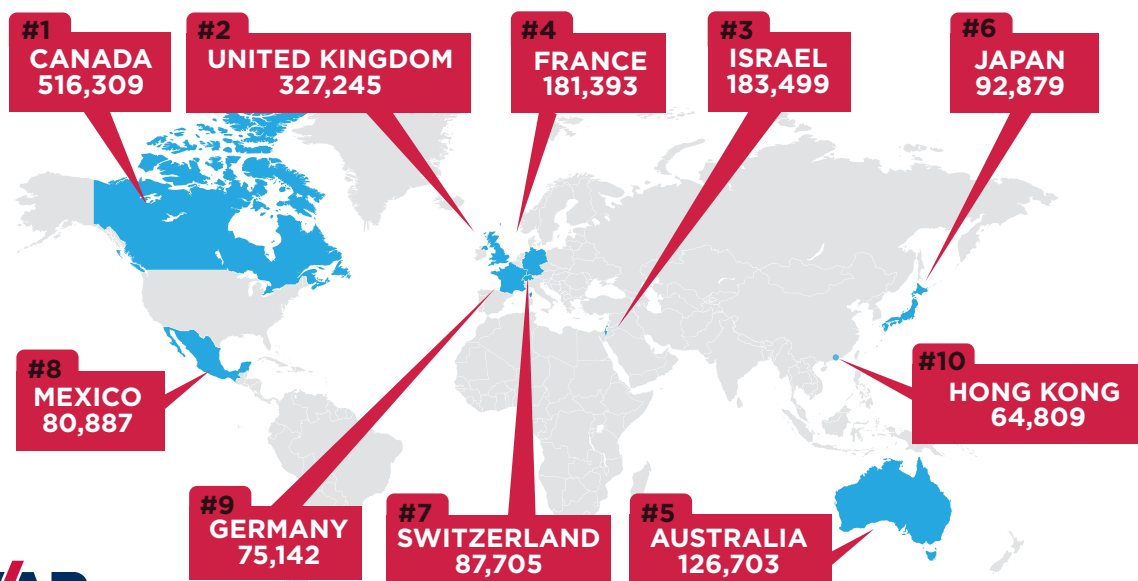
This edition of the OCPA estimates the voting rate of the overseas citizen voting-age population in the 2020 General Election; compares the rate to that of the voting-age population living in the United States; determines how much of the difference in participation is due to obstacles unique to the overseas voting process; and assesses how FVAP can help mitigate these obstacles. The full report is available at [FVAP.gov](https://FVAP.gov).

### OVERSEAS CITIZENS WHO CAN VOTE

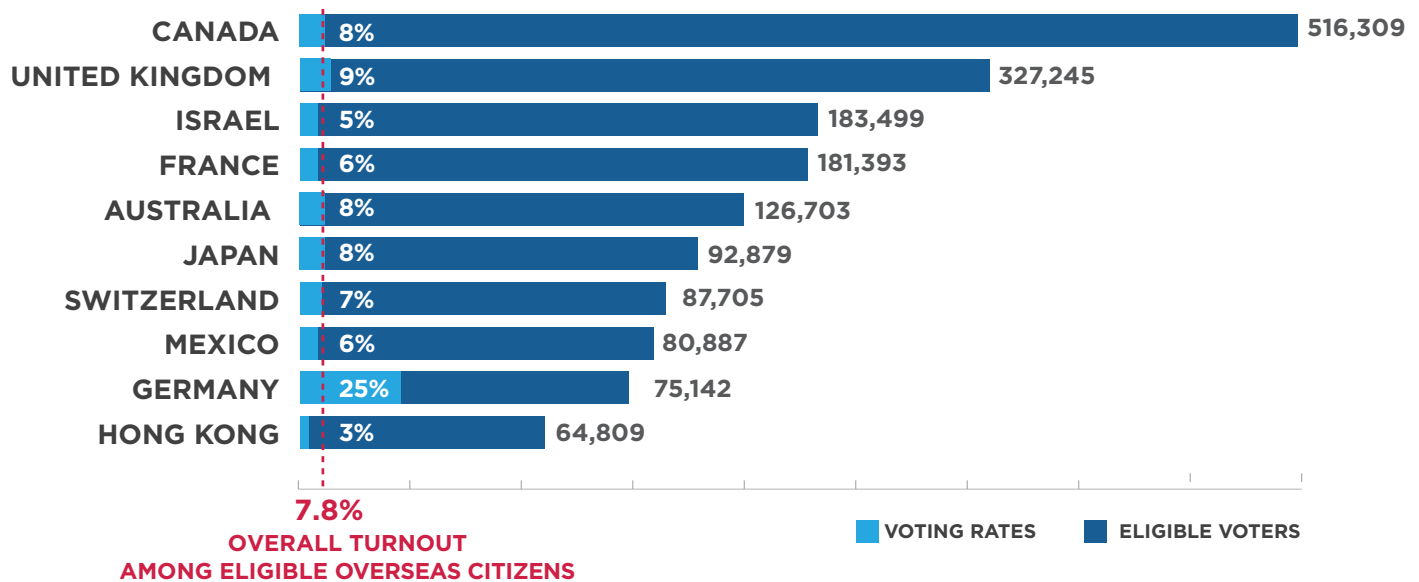
To estimate how many overseas citizens there are, where they live, and the number eligible to vote, FVAP combines data from U.S. and foreign government estimates and predictors from the academic literature on migration. The estimates shown here were first published in the 2018 OCPA report (released in 2020); insufficient 2020 data was available to produce new estimates. FVAP will calculate new estimates using lessons learned from the 2014-2018 OCPA analyses as well as additional foreign government estimates and other data when it is available.



### LOCATIONS WITH THE LARGEST NUMBERS OF ADULT U.S. CITIZENS

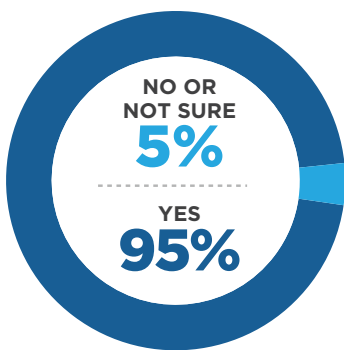


## ESTIMATED TURNOUT AMONG OVERSEAS CITIZENS IN 2020

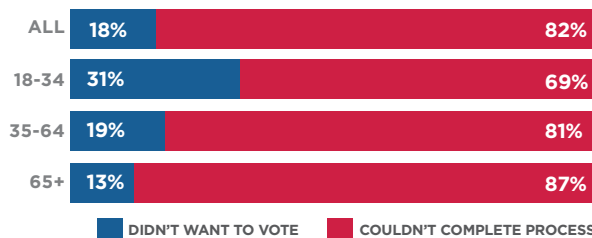


FVAP combined state data on the number of ballots requested and submitted by voters in 2020 with the OCPA estimates of eligible voters to calculate overseas voter turnout overall and by country. Average turnout was 7.8%, comparable with 2016. Over one-third (37%) of survey respondents said it was the first time they voted in a U.S. election from the country in which they were living.

### RETURNED BALLOT



### REASONS FOR NOT RETURNING BALLOT



### MAIN DIFFICULTIES

**16%**  
MAILING SYSTEM

**14%**  
REQUESTING A BALLOT

**14%**  
RETURNING A BALLOT

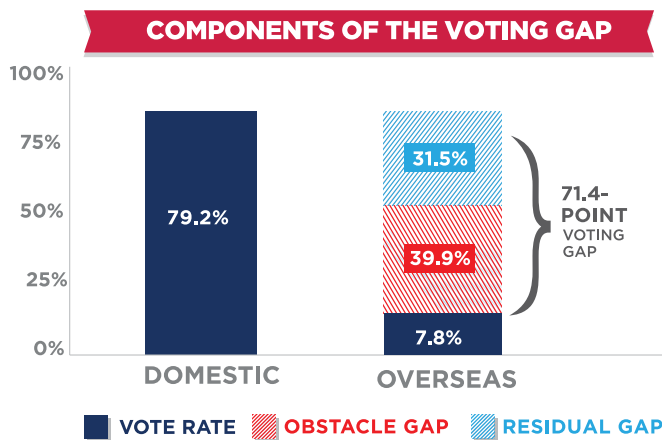
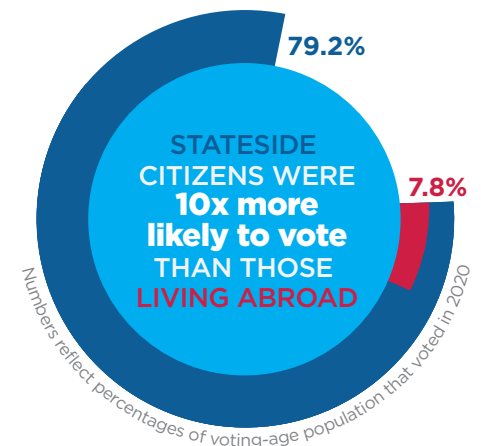
Among the 5% of overseas citizens who requested a ballot but ultimately didn't return it, some decided they didn't want to vote while the vast majority had difficulty completing the process. In 2020, the three most common problems all overseas voters encountered (both those who ultimately cast a ballot and those who did not) were difficulties with the mailing system, difficulties requesting a ballot, and difficulties returning a ballot.

# THE 2020 VOTING GAP: DOMESTIC VS. OVERSEAS

Compared to people living in the United States, citizens living abroad are much less likely to vote in federal elections. FVAP calls the difference the voting gap.

While some overseas citizens don't want to vote, in 2020 over half of the gap between domestic and overseas voting rates could be attributed to obstacles overseas citizens encountered while trying to vote that domestic voters do not face.

The portion of the voting gap attributable to obstacles varies substantially among different regions of the world, with high-obstacle countries concentrated in Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. FVAP's Interactive Data Center includes a map categorizing each country by the size of its obstacle gap.

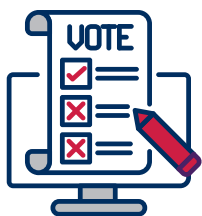


SOURCE: FVAP OVERSEAS CITIZEN POPULATION ANALYSIS

**Obstacles gap:** The percentage of overseas citizens who wanted or tried to vote but were unsuccessful. They may have been helped by voter education, state legislative changes, or improved communication with election offices.

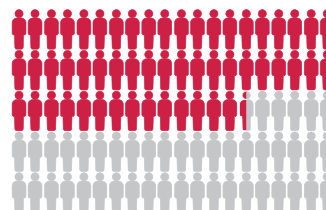
**Residual gap:** The percentage of overseas citizens who did not vote because of factors that cannot be resolved within the voting process, such as lack of interest or motivation.

**Obstacles:** Factors that impede the speed at which voters receive and transmit election materials — voter registration forms, ballot requests, and ballots themselves.



VOTERS\* WHO RECEIVED THEIR BALLOT ELECTRONICALLY WERE  
**OVER 1.7X MORE LIKELY**  
TO VOTE SUCCESSFULLY

\*IN HIGHER-OBSTACLE COUNTRIES



ELECTRONIC BALLOT RETURN REDUCES OBSTACLES  
**BUT ONLY 59%**  
OF VOTERS WHO COULD USE IT\* DID SO

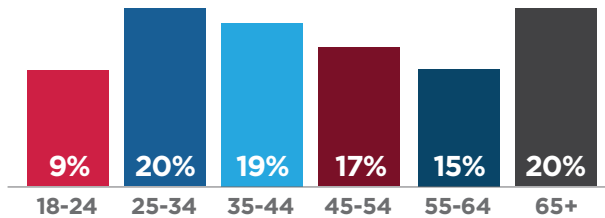
\*THEIR STATE ALLOWS ELECTRONIC RETURN

Mailing times can be such an obstacle for overseas voters that the 2009 *Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act* mandated that states send ballots at least 45 days ahead of general elections and offer electronic transmission. Some states also allow voters to return their voted ballot electronically.

\* The domestic vote rate used here differs from the Census Bureau estimate. The Census Bureau combines people who did not know if they voted or did not answer the question with those who said they did not vote, leading to a larger percentage of nonvoters. Those two groups are excluded from the domestic vote rate reported here because it is unknown if they voted. The overseas citizen vote rate is the percentage of the voting age population that submitted a ballot and had a vote recorded in state vote history records.

# WHO ARE OVERSEAS REGISTERED VOTERS?

## ALL AGES



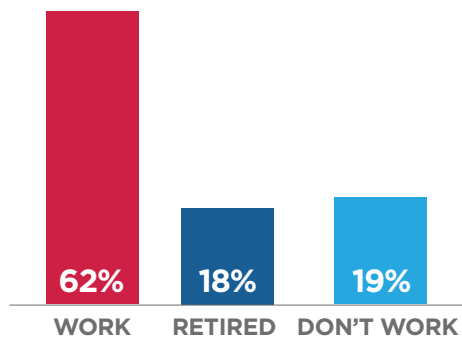
## WELL EDUCATED

LESS THAN BACHELOR'S DEGREE **20%**

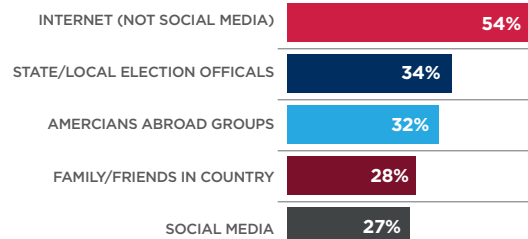
BACHELOR'S DEGREE **35%**

MORE THAN BACHELOR'S DEGREE **45%**

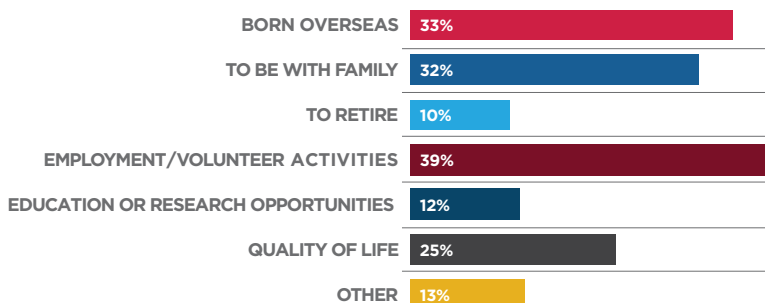
## WORKERS



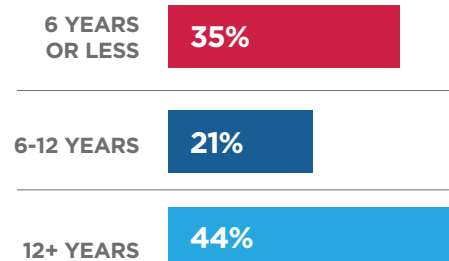
## ABSENTEE VOTING INFORMATION SOURCES



## REASONS FOR LIVING ABROAD



## LIVED IN CURRENT COUNTRY



Data from FVAP's Overseas Citizen Population Survey, conducted among a representative sample of 5,282 overseas registered voters who requested a ballot in 2020, reveal a voting bloc of mostly well-educated workers of all ages.

## ABOUT THE OVERSEAS CITIZEN POPULATION ANALYSIS

The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) first conducted the Overseas Citizen Population Analysis (OCPA) following the 2014 election to learn more about this population and how its members navigate the absentee voting process. The OCPA fulfills Section 20308(b) of Title 52, U.S.C., which requires an annual report by the Department of Defense to the President and Congress, including an assessment of voter registration and participation by overseas civilians. The current analysis of data collected following the 2020 election was a four-step process:

1. Estimate the voting rate of the overseas citizen voting-age population in the 2020 General Election;
2. Compare the level of participation to that of the voting-age population living in the U.S.;
3. Determine to what degree that estimated difference in participation between the two populations is due to voting obstacles unique to overseas citizens; and
4. Assess the extent to which policies designed to mitigate these obstacles are successful.

The OCPA combines data from these sources to provide insights on the voting behaviors of U.S. citizens living abroad that are unavailable elsewhere: foreign government estimates and U.S. government records of citizens abroad; administrative records of absentee ballot requests and vote histories from the 50 states and the District of Columbia; and FVAP's 2020 Overseas Citizen Population Survey. Conducted among a representative sample of 5,282 overseas registered voters\* who requested a ballot for the 2020 General Election, it details the demographic characteristics and voting experiences of this group. The 2020 OCPA uses the population estimates calculated as part of the 2018 OCPA. Those calculations incorporated new data sources for foreign government estimates and Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as well as updated records of U.S. citizens living overseas that filed taxes using a foreign address. Because the data changed, the models changed, and thus the final estimates for the 2000 - 2016 period differ from those in pre-2018 OCPA reports. Comparisons to prior years should be made using data in the 2020 OCPA report.

\*Active duty military and their spouses are surveyed separately.

## ABOUT FVAP AND UOCAVA

FVAP works to ensure Service members, their eligible family members and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to successfully do so—from anywhere in the world. The Director of FVAP administers the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)* on behalf of the Secretary of Defense.

Citizens whose voting rights are protected under *UOCAVA* include:

- Active duty members of the Armed Forces, Merchant Marine, Public Health Service, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Commissioned Officer Corps
- Eligible family members of Uniformed Services personnel
- U.S. citizens residing outside the United States

*UOCAVA* requires that the 50 states, U.S. territories and the District of Columbia allow protected voters to register and vote absentee in general, special, primary and runoff elections for federal offices. Federal protections include:

- Requiring all states to allow a citizen covered under *UOCAVA* to register to vote and request an absentee ballot using a single form, the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA).
- Requiring states to send absentee ballots to *UOCAVA* voters no later than 45 days before a federal election.
- Requiring states to offer voters a way to receive their ballots electronically as stipulated in the 2009 *Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act*.
- Allowing citizens covered by *UOCAVA* to use the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot (FWAB) as a back-up ballot to vote in any federal election if they do not receive their regular absentee ballot in time to return it before deadlines.

States and territories may have supplementary laws and requirements, which are available at [FVAP.gov](https://www.fvap.gov).