

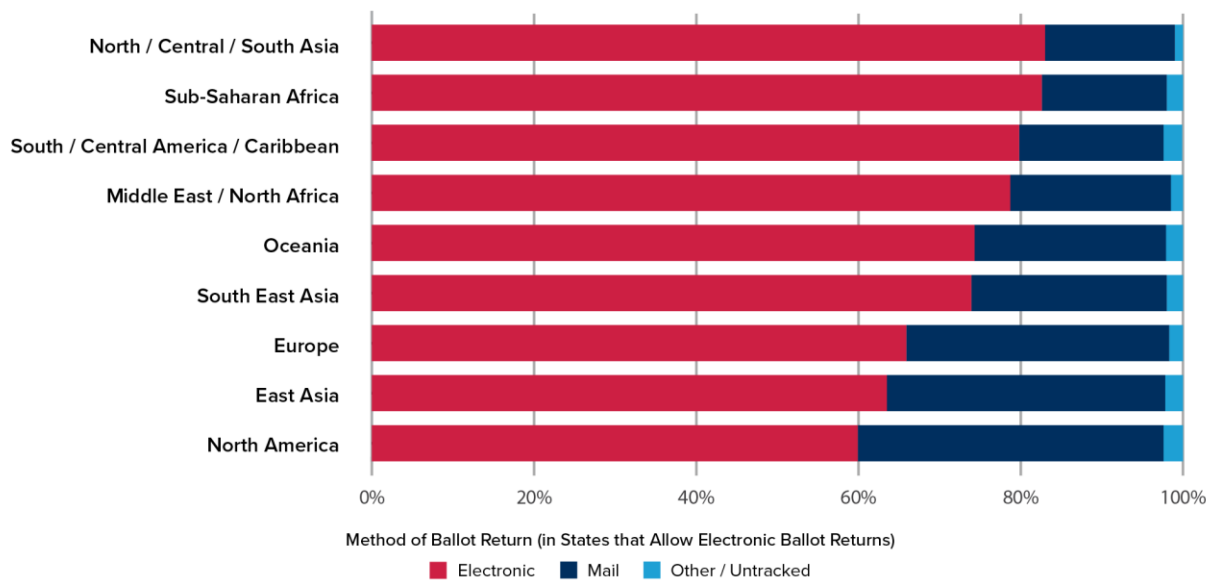
THE UOCAVA VOTING PROCESS BY WORLD REGION

UOCAVA voters relied on electronic methods for ballot transmission and return, especially when residing in distant countries or regions with unreliable postal service.

Mail delays can hinder non-military overseas citizens’ ability to vote in U.S. elections; previous analyses have illustrated that the impact of these delays varies by world region.¹ To explore the extent to which overseas voters used electronic transmission options and the timing of when election offices received ballots from voters in different world regions, this issue brief uses data from the Election Administration and Voting Survey Section B (ESB) Data Standard.² The transactional data available through the ESB Data Standard allow otherwise unavailable identification of areas for improvement in the voter registration, ballot request, and return processes for voters covered under the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)*.

Results. Data from the 12 states and seven jurisdictions—together accounting for about 40 percent of the total UOCAVA population—that contributed their data to the ESB Data Standard showed that more than 60 percent of the overseas UOCAVA voters³ in the 2020 General Election voted from Europe and North America (i.e., Canada and Mexico).⁴ A majority of UOCAVA voters in every world region (more than 60 percent) relied on electronic ballot transmission methods to receive their blank ballot. Three of the four world regions with higher use of electronic transmission (Sub-Saharan Africa, South/Central America/Caribbean, and Middle East/North Africa) are also the world regions where overseas citizens reported the lowest levels of reliability in the postal mail system in FVAP’s Overseas Citizens Population Survey (OCPS).¹ Moreover, as found in the 2020 OCPS, while perceived reliability of the postal service was notably low in some world regions, internet reliability was consistently high—82 percent of all respondents from all world regions reported that internet access is reliable or very reliable.⁵ The perceived reliability of internet access, in addition to convenience, and potential pandemic-related delays in postal mail may have played a large role in the decision of UOCAVA voters to obtain their blank ballots largely through electronic means.

Figure 1. Percentage of Ballots Returned by Mode in States and Jurisdictions that Allowed for Electronic Ballot Return



¹ See https://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Reports/ResearchNoteInternationalMail_20161128_final.pdf and <https://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Reports/FVAP-2016-OCPS-FINAL-Report.pdf>

² The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) and The Council of State Governments Overseas Voting Initiative are developing the ESB Data Standard to provide a common format for states to report UOCAVA voting transactions, including the date each ballot arrived, how it was transmitted to and from the voter, and its final disposition.

³ Active duty military members (as well as their spouses and dependents) who are located more than 50 miles away from their voting jurisdiction are covered by UOCAVA. For the purposes of this issue brief, analyses included only data from UOCAVA voters residing overseas. Additionally, for security reasons, states usually do not receive or share the country of residence for ADM stationed overseas, so a majority of the population represented in this issue brief are overseas citizens, who are required to provide the country from which they are voting.

⁴ Data in this issue brief refers only to the states and jurisdictions that participated in the 2020 ESB. For more information see: https://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Reports/2020-ESB-Research-Note_Final.pdf

⁵ The internet access questions within the OCPS have the potential for respondent bias since internet access is required to take the survey. There is no data available explaining why non-respondents did not complete the survey, therefore any potential bias cannot be measured.

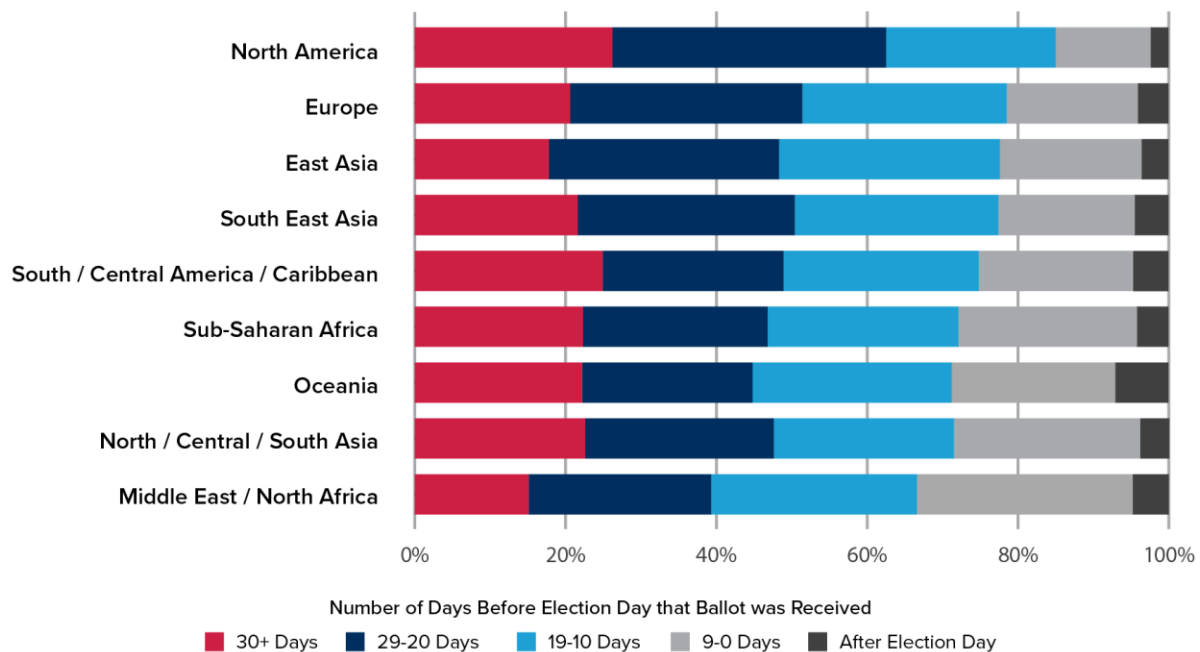
ISSUE BRIEF

Although a very small portion of the blank ballots transmitted to UOCAVA voters living abroad were returned undeliverable (0.2 percent), the vast majority of those undeliverable ballots were sent via postal mail (99.6 percent) to voters who had filed a ballot request before the year of the election (82.4 percent). These results are consistent across world regions and suggest blank ballots that are sent via postal mail are less likely to reach recipients. This may be due in part to outdated address information, as is likely the case with older ballot requests.

Although states are required to offer UOCAVA voters an electronic option for receiving their ballot, states are not required to offer an electronic means of ballot return. Figure 1 shows the method of choice for UOCAVA voters to return their ballots in states and jurisdictions that allowed electronic ballot return for the 2020 General Election. The use of electronic ballot return was notably higher than regular mail, particularly in world regions with the lowest perceived postal mail reliability as found in the 2020 OCPS (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa, South/Central America and the Caribbean).¹

When looking at ballot return timing, voters who requested their ballots after the 45-day deadline by which states must send blank ballots to UOCAVA voters (i.e., after September 19, 2020) returned their ballots close to election day. For voters who requested their ballot in 2020 before the 45-day deadline, there were subtle differences between world regions that may point to longer times between the moment a voter sends a ballot and when the ballot reaches the election office. Figure 2 shows that ballots from UOCAVA voters residing in North America tended to reach their election offices earliest, whereas ballots from voters residing further away (e.g., Oceania) or in regions with the lowest perceived postal mail reliability (e.g., Middle East/North Africa) were received later.

Figure 2. Ballots From World Regions by Date of Election Office Receipt — 2020 Applications Received Before the 45-day Deadline



Conclusions. For the 2020 General Election, a majority of UOCAVA voters elected to receive their ballot electronically (i.e., email, online, or fax) and chose to return it using such options when allowed by state laws. The use of the electronic options was also related to lower levels of undeliverable ballots, avoiding potential delays when a voter is residing in countries with unreliable postal systems. Additionally, results in this brief show the importance of requesting a ballot before the 45-day deadline for UOCAVA voters to be able to return their ballots on time, especially when residing in remote locations or countries with unreliable postal services.

Recommendations.

- Target communication efforts about the importance of acting early particularly in locations that are remote or have unreliable postal systems.
- Provide information to overseas UOCAVA voters on each state's electronic ballot return policy to ensure that UOCAVA voters who have an electronic return option are informed about it.
- Continue working with states to improve the country data they submit to the ESB Data Standard project so that FVAP can better understand and address voters' obstacles related to the country and world region from which they vote.