Voting from Abroad
How Election Officials Can Reduce Obstacles for Military and Overseas Voters

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Executive Summary

The paper outlines a risk mitigation framework to evaluate different technology integrations state election officials could pursue that would improve voter turnout among overseas and military voters. Using this risk mitigation framework, the highest-value, lowest-risk opportunities for state election officials to pursue include: 1) facilitating digital signatures on the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA); 2) implementing a pilot ballot tracking system; 3) communicating with voters via email, ensuring that emails are frequent, concise, and clear; and 4) ensuring that communications abide by clear design principles.

In order to implement these key recommendations, state election officials will need to place an employee in charge of overseas voter turnout; work with pro bono design firms and email service providers to redesign their voter engagement materials for simplicity; and engage with other colleagues to develop best practices around e-signatures and ballot tracking.
**Background**

In the 2020 election, voters covered under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizen Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voted at a rate of 7% – ten times less than the domestic average.¹

While every state has UOCAVA voters such as military personnel, Peace Corps volunteers, corporate executives, and students studying abroad, not every state implements the same measures to ensure that these voters have access to information, registration, and other resources to help them successfully submit their ballots on time.

For most UOCAVA voters, obstacles to voting include 1) a lack of understanding how to vote; 2) a lack of awareness that they are even eligible to vote; 3) challenges with the mailing system such as USPS suspensions and a lack of post offices; and 4) general difficulties completing the process.²

According to the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), UOCAVA turnout could be closer to 46.9% if these obstacles were removed.³ For example, Orange County, California, took specific actions to improve turnout among these voters by redesigning materials and simplifying the language of its voter information and emails. As a result, Orange County now witnesses turnout from its UOCAVA voters at nearly the same rate as its domestic voters; compared to the rest of the country, Orange County UOCAVA turnout far surpasses the national average.⁴

Given that there are multiple steps in the voting process (as depicted in Figure 1.0), any shifts in operations can either hinder or help these voters. In the case of a handful of jurisdictions, for example, even the simplest technology integrations have greatly helped the voting experience — from awareness to communications to ballot tracking.

**Figure 1.0: Voting Chain of Events**

Steps involved in the voting process. Those shaded in blue present the biggest opportunities for helping UOCAVA voters successfully complete the process.

By integrating technology and implementing subtle innovations to operational tasks, officials can increase state voter turnout and help make operations more efficient, streamlined, and voter-centric.
Election officials should implement the following four technology best practices to enhance the voting experience for UOCAVA voters: 1) Allow digital signatures on the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA); 2) Enable ballot tracking; 3) Leverage innovative email technology to communicate early and often with UOCAVA voters; and 4) Design communications for simplicity and clarity.


The FPCA plays an important role in helping UOCAVA voters register to vote and request ballots. Most states still require "wet" signatures on this form, which requires printing and scanning the FPCA for submission. However, these days, nearly 40% of American households don’t have a printer; this percentage is likely even higher for overseas households, given assignments like Peace Corps and military deployments, which often place Americans in remote locations with limited access to printers and scanners.

By allowing secure digital signatures (which can include a photo upload of a signature or an official e-signature) and an electronic return of the FPCA, states can greatly reduce the burden on voters who might not have access to printers and increase the likelihood of successful submission and expedited processing. According to a state election official in West Virginia, once these measures were implemented, the majority of UOCAVA voters who had the opportunity to sign and return the FPCA electronically did so.

See Figure 2.0 for an example of how digital signatures could be implemented and accepted.

“I didn’t vote from overseas because the process is too difficult. To get the information, the right documents, print them, and mail them to the US in time from Guinea, where there isn’t a real functioning mail system, was just overwhelming. If any part of that process was digital, it would have significantly changed my overseas voting experience. I definitely would have voted.”

– Wiatta Thomas, Overseas Citizen and Returned Peace Corps Volunteer
Step 2: Voter uploads scanned signature for the FPCA.

You must email, fax or mail your signed and dated ballot request to Cambridge Election Commission.

Choose how to send your ballot request:
- Email
- Fax
- Mail

Add your scanned signature:
- Print your name with a dark pen on large letters on a blank sheet of white paper.
- Click to scan your signature with your device camera. Or upload an image file, such as JPEG or PNG to upload your signature (PDF and TIF files will not work) to upload your signature. Note: file.
- You’ll be able to adjust the size of the file after you take it.

Click to Start

Step 3: Voter double checks pre-populated email to send to their election official with an attached digital version of the FPCA, signed with a photo upload of their signature.

You must email, fax or mail your signed and dated ballot request to Cambridge Election Commission.

Choose how to send your ballot request:
- Email
- Fax
- Mail

Add your scanned signature:
- Fresh or scan with your mouse on the image to resize it. Missing pct? Zoom out to fix it.
- Drag with your mouse/finger to place your signature on the red line next to the "X". 
- Click "Use this Signature" to add it to your form and compose a message to your election official.

Step 4: Voter receives submission confirmation.
2. Leverage proven technologies to implement a ballot tracking system for UOCAVA voters that allows them to follow their completed ballot and ensure that the jurisdiction receives and counts it.

In 2020, FVAP, the Council of State Governments (CSG), the USPS, the Military Postal Service Agency (MPS), and several local election officials piloted a full life-cycle ballot tracking system through the USPS–MPS network. The pilot implemented proven technologies, including “dedicated labels” (otherwise known as the “Label–11 DoD”), which granted a voter the ability to track their ballot’s journey from overseas to the jurisdiction. The pilot yielded highly successful results, with 82% of participants very satisfied with the service and 87% of voters confident or very confident that their ballot was counted in the election.²

By offering both voters and election officials a way to track UOCAVA ballots, FVAP and its partners boosted overall voter confidence, the rate of successful ballot acceptance, and voter turnout.³ Other jurisdictions should consider participating in the next expansion of the military ballot tracking initiative.

3. Communicate with voters via email and ensure that emails abide by clear design principles.

In the digital era, communicating with UOCAVA voters digitally can make all the difference. By following the checklist of email best practices, states can ensure that their UOCAVA voters have all they need to vote.

Checklist of Email Best Practices

- **Email service provider.** State election officials should maintain a database for overseas voters with an easy-to-use email communications platform such as MailChimp or SendGrid. Overseas voters’ email addresses can be obtained via the FPCA.
- **Frequency.** Election officials should ensure that communications are sent on Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Labor Day in election years, as this is an opportunity to weave voter communications into the holidays and spur conversations about how to engage in elections back home (see Tip #1: Timing).
- **Length.** Emails should not exceed one page.
- **Language.** Offices should leverage simple, clear, concise language about when and how voters should register (see Tip #2: Language).

**TIP #1: Timing.** At minimum, state election officials should send communications to UOCAVA voters around the Fourth of July during an election year. Many overseas citizens celebrate the Fourth of July despite not living in the US. This can be an opportunity to weave voter communications into the holiday and spur conversations about how to engage in elections back home. The table below provides a suggested cadence and structure for voter information emails.
Table 1: Proposed Email Cadence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Email Type</th>
<th>Goal/Positioning</th>
<th>Suggested Timing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcement</td>
<td>Give voters an overview of the overseas voting process and remind them of the logistics involved.</td>
<td>150 days before election (Memorial Day)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Ask voters to begin the process.</td>
<td>120 days before election (Fourth of July)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>105 days before election (suggested follow-up reminder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>90 days before election (suggested follow-up reminder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>75 days before election (suggested follow-up reminder)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final Call</td>
<td>Draft an urgent call to action for voters to register.</td>
<td>60 days before election</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TIP #2: Email Language.** Emails often fall prey to having too much text, superfluous or overcomplicated language, and overly dense steps and instructions. See Figure 3.0 for an example of an overwhelming voter outreach email alongside a redesigned version that simplifies the language, steps, and overall look and feel. Figure 4.0 provides a sample email template for use.

Notice that the "old" email is incredibly text-heavy, lengthy, and confusing in its description of the voting process to the overseas voter. By contrast, the "new" email sample demonstrates the power of leveraging a colorful, welcoming header, along with only the most pertinent information. This new version makes good use of bolded text and uses hyperlinks to let voters explore more information if they wish, rather than automatically including it in the body of the email and overwhelming the reader.
4. (Re)design materials for simplicity.

Design matters. Especially in an era of information overload and digital saturation, it’s important that materials are clear, concise, and visually appealing. By utilizing the following checklist of design suggestions, states can ensure that all materials and communications meet this goal.

Checklist of Design Suggestions

- **Use images.** Leverage imagery, such as icons, illustrations, graphs, and charts, where possible to reduce text.
- **Be concise.** Omit unnecessary words and ensure succinct descriptions.
- **Separate text.** Use numbers or bolded headers to separate text into visually distinct categories.
- **Use accent colors.** Use one or two accent colors to distinguish important reminders.

TIP #3: Instructions. Redesigning instruction materials can be as simple as cutting unnecessary text, simplifying language, and adding big, bold headers to separate sections. Even small changes to design make a big difference. See Figure 4.0 for an example of Orange County, California’s voter insert before and after it was redesigned.

The old insert is very text-heavy, is overwhelming in its use of bold and underlined text, and has many steps blended together with little information hierarchy. By contrast, the new material leverages a bright header and subheaders to separate steps into distinct categories for the eye to quickly parse. Similarly, the new insert leverages red text to highlight the most important aspects of the voter instructions.

“After redesigning our voter outreach materials, envelopes, and inserts, we witnessed a marked increase in voter satisfaction.”
– County election official

A Framework for Evaluation

The recommendations above are based on the risk/reward framework outlined on the following page. Technology isn’t inherently “good” or “bad” and in many cases, it can greatly reduce barriers to the voting process, especially for voters stationed overseas. Table 2.0 below provides a framework that evaluates each voting step, possible technology integrations, the potential risks and rewards of those integrations, and tactics for mitigating risks.
Based on the analyses provided in this matrix, the four technology integrations recommended in this paper above (and bolded below) best maximize reward and minimize risk. State election officials might consider using this risk/reward framework for other technology integrations they are considering in the future.

### Implementations

#### To implement the four recommendations above, election officials should:

- **Place an employee in charge of UOCAVA turnout.** Whether this responsibility is delegated to a new hire or an existing employee, placing someone in charge of UOCAVA voters will help to ensure progress across these recommendations and that these voters are not forgotten.

- **Engage pro bono design firms or universities to help with materials redesign.** State election officials can partner with nonprofit design firms like the Center for Civic Design, lower-cost freelance providers like Fiverr or Upwork, lower-cost self-service sites like Canva, university design teams, or interns to redesign their materials with little expenditure.

- **Engage with colleagues to adopt best practices around e-signatures and ballot tracking.** State election officials should learn how other jurisdictions — such as Orange County, California, the state of Colorado, or Escambia County, Florida — successfully and securely implemented similar procedures to better the voting experience, and consider ways to integrate these operations in their own state.
Appendix A: Interviews

The team interviewed the following individuals for this playbook:

- Amy Cohen: Executive Director, National Association of State Election Directors (NASED)
- Candice Kerestan: Chair, Democrats Abroad
- David Beirne: Director, Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP)
- David Stafford: Supervisor of Elections, Escambia County, Florida
- Deak Kersey: General Counsel, West Virginia Secretary of State
- Gary Leeling: Senate Armed Services Minority Counsel
- Jocelyn Bucaro: Director, Mobile Voting Project, Tusk Philanthropies
- Joseph Kiniry: Principled CEO and Chief Scientist, Free & Fair; Principal Scientist, Galois
- Josh Benaloh: Senior Cryptographer, Microsoft Research
- Judd Choate: Director, Division of Elections, Colorado
- Lindsey Forson: Director of Cybersecurity Programs, National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS)
- Lori Augino: Director of Elections, Washington State
- Mac Warner: Secretary of State, West Virginia
- Marylouise Serrato: Executive Director, American Citizens Abroad
- Naveed Shah: Political Director, Common Defense
- Neal Kelley: Registrar of Voters, Orange County, California
- Sarah Streider: Executive Director, Secure Families Initiative
- Sarah Vella: Program Analyst, Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP)
- Susan Dziedziczynka-Sulmat: President and CEO, U.S. Vote Foundation
- Susan Greenhalgh: Senior Advisor on Election Security, Free Speech For People
- Taylor Lansdale: Associate Public Policy Director, Overseas Voting Initiative, The Council of State Governments

Appendix B: Sample Emails

This appendix shares sample language for email communications. It is recommended that election officials send these communications to their UOCAVA voters per the cadence listed in Table 1.0.

### Announcement Email

**Subject:** You can vote from overseas — here’s how.

**Body:**

Dear [First Name],

The next election in [Jurisdiction] is on [Date]. To register to vote, you’ll need to complete a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) form, which you can find at your local US Embassy or the [Federal Voting Assistance Program website](#). Filling out this form will take less than 10 minutes to complete. Here in [Jurisdiction], you can return your FCPA form by:

- **Mail:** [Address]
- **Email:** [email]
- **Fax:** [###-###-####]

Sincerely,

[Name]
Engagement Email

Subject: Sign up to vote from abroad today!

Body:

Dear [First Name],

As a reminder, the next election in [Jurisdiction] is on [Date].
That’s less than [180] days away!

To register to vote, you’ll need to complete a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) form, which you can find at your local US Embassy or at the Federal Voting Assistance Program website. The form should take less than 10 minutes to complete.

It’s important to take early action because we send your ballot 45 days before the election date.

Here in [Jurisdiction], you can return your FCPA form by:

Mail:
[Address]

Email:
[email]

Fax:
[###-###-####]

Sincerely,
[Name]

Final Call Email

Subject: Sign up to vote from abroad today!

Body:

Dear [First Name],

We’re sending out ballots to vote in less than 2 weeks!

To sign up, you’ll need to complete a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) form, which you can find at your local US Embassy or the Federal Voting Assistance Program website (less than 10 minutes to complete).

Here in [Jurisdiction], you can return your FCPA form by:

Mail:
[Address]

Email:
[email]

Fax:
[###-###-####]

At this point, we recommend you send it in by email or fax to make sure we receive your registration in time.

Sincerely,
[Name]
Endnotes

2. Candice Kerestan, Chair, Democrats Abroad, interview by author, November 8, 2021.
5. Orange County, CA data for domestic versus UOCAVA turnout; UOCAVA turnout is much closer to domestic turnout, and far higher than the UOCAVA national average (7%).
tools
tools/EAVS
tools/2020
EAVS
Report
Final