

Dispelling Myths:

CSG Overseas Voting Initiative's Report on
2016 Military Ballot Tracking Pilot



The Council
of State
Governments



CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Background & Purpose.....	2
Implementation	2
Setting the Course.....	4
Qualitative Findings	6
Voter Satisfaction.....	6
Technical Findings.....	7
Conclusion	9

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Too often, discussions surrounding absentee ballots for active duty military personnel serving overseas center on the belief that there is a systemic problem with successfully transmitting ballots to these voters by mail. Significant policy reforms enacted by Congress—including the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, or MOVE Act—have attempted to address this problem by requiring states to allow the transmission of balloting materials in an electronic format so voters have options. However, anecdotes continue to exist that point to the challenges of ballots reaching military personnel serving overseas without concrete data.

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, or UOCAVA, covers U.S. citizens who are active members of the Uniformed Services—the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard, the commissioned corps of the Public Health Service, and of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration—and their eligible family members, members of the Merchant Marine and their eligible family members, and U.S. citizens residing outside the United States.

Research³ conducted by the Federal Voting Assistance Program, or FVAP, illustrates another challenge which is dispelling the myth that military ballots are only considered for tabulation and counted in close elections. Dispelling this myth requires a method to positively assure military voters that their ballots are accepted for tabulation rather than only notifying them if their ballot is rejected. The question remained in 2016: could a mechanism exist to provide overseas military with full tracking and visibility of their blank ballots. Such a mechanism could not only improve customer service and eliminate one myth regarding the tabulation of military ballots, but valuable data could be used to assess the overall success of military mail in reaching these important voters.

The research discussed in this report and conducted by FVAP, in cooperation with The Council of State Governments, or CSG, through its cooperative agreement that formed the Overseas Voting Initiative, or OVI, with direct support from the United States Postal Service, or USPS, and the Military Postal Service Agency, or MPSA sought to answer these questions through the implementation of the Military Ballot Tracking Pilot, or MBTP

FVAP works to ensure Military Service members, their eligible family members, and other overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to successfully do so from anywhere in the world. To further this mission, FVAP and CSG through the OVI cooperative agreement, implemented the MBTP in which mail ballots were tracked during the 2016 general election. The MBTP tracked ballots at all points in their life cycle: from the time they left the local election official's office, to delivery to the Military Post Office, or MPO, to delivery to the voter overseas, to the voted ballots ultimate delivery back to the local election office.

The two primary goals of the MBTP were to:

1. Examine the feasibility of providing a full life cycle tracking of ballots to and from military personnel serving overseas to increase customer service and visibility; and
2. Improve data collection to facilitate the identification of any systemic problems with the mailing of balloting materials to military personnel serving overseas.

This effort represented the first time that the full life cycle tracking of ballots sent through the domestic and military postal systems.

Six local election jurisdictions participated in the pilot with FVAP, CSG, the USPS and the MPSA: Orange County (California) and San Diego County (California), City and County of Denver (Colorado), Escambia County (Florida), Okaloosa County (Florida), and Harris County (Texas). A total of 1,588 ballots were processed through the MBTP at a total project cost of less than \$31,000.

The MBTP's evaluation included analysis of transactional data furnished by participating local election official jurisdictions, parcel scan data furnished from the MPSA and the USPS, technical feedback from the pilot's principal stakeholders (FVAP, CSG, the USPS and the MPSA) and six participating local election jurisdictions, and a customer satisfaction survey of voters who were afforded this tracking service. Additionally, participating military personnel who received materials through the MBTP were asked about their overall satisfaction with the pilot.

The MBTP's findings include:

1. An estimated 85-90 percent of all ballots were successfully delivered to destination MPOs.
2. Variability of the application of parcel scans within the USPS/Military Postal Service, or MPS postal system led to less definitive conclusions and illustrates the need for greater business processing improvement.
3. Ninety-eight percent of all overseas Active Duty Military voters were satisfied or very satisfied with the conduct of the MBTP.
4. The average period for ballots to be transmitted and returned from theaters of operation (e.g., Europe or Asia) were substantially the same, though units in Europe were slightly more likely to receive final delivery scans.
5. The MPS met the seven-day service level target, with average return time of 4 days.

Based on the MBTP's success, the USPS is examining the development of new products or services to enable local election officials to offer a similar ballot tracking experience to military personnel overseas for the 2018 general election, with the possibility of continued enhancements in time for the 2020 presidential election.

Background & Purpose

FVAP is the Department of Defense's program charged with administering the federal responsibilities of the UOCAVA. Its mission is to help ensure that Service members, their eligible family members and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to do so successfully. However, UOCAVA voters, particularly those stationed or residing overseas, often face complexities in the voting process that do not affect in-person or stateside absentee voters.

Congress passed the MOVE Act in 2009 which required the expedited return of voted ballots for active duty military. To comply with MOVE, the USPS and the MPSA adopted a new Label 11-DoD, which identified that the envelope was that of a UOCAVA voter and required expedited delivery. This expedited service for this class of returned mail to delivery within seven days from the time the voted ballot entered the MPS. An additional byproduct of the Label 11-DoD is the ability for voters to track their ballots not only within the MPSA's custody, but also within the domestic USPS network all the way to the point of delivery at local election offices. However, blank ballots mailed to military personnel stationed overseas do not have this level of tracking. Local election offices can use Intelligent Mail® Barcode, or IMb®, for domestic tracking, but the MPS does not currently scan Intelligent Mail® Barcode, or IMb®.

The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, or MOVE Act, expanded UOCAVA significantly in 2009, when Congress passed the law to provide greater protections for service members, their families and overseas citizens. Among other provisions, the MOVE Act requires states to transmit validly-requested absentee ballots to UOCAVA voters no later than 45 days before a federal election, when the request has been received by that date, except where the state has been granted an undue hardship waiver approved by the Department of Defense for that election.

In 2014, FVAP research⁴ identified a series of negative perceptions and myths among military personnel regarding the overall acceptance and processing of military ballots. These perceptions and myths include the notion that overseas military mail may not be successfully delivered or that ballots submitted by military personnel are not even considered by local election officials unless an election is close. These impressions may negatively impact the voters' willingness to participate in the election process. Included in this research was an overall recommendation for providing positive reinforcement and greater awareness to military personnel on the current location of their ballots to refute these misperceptions.

Based on these research findings, FVAP analyzed how it could improve its service to its key customers (military personnel, their families, and other overseas citizens) attempting to vote absentee in federal elections and how it could combat the misperceptions held by some overseas voters. The following idea proved to be the impetus for the MBTP: Would it be possible for military personnel to fully track their balloting materials just as they would a commercial shipment from an online retailer? Further, would such tracking information help to identify obstacles that delay the transmission and return of mail ballots?

Notification to voters regarding any ballots delayed in mailing would enable voters to contact their local election official and request a new ballot or allow them to use a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot, or FWAB, as a legitimate backup. This, in turn, could build voters' overall confidence in overseas voting by mail and help to combat misperceptions.

Working through its existing cooperative agreement with CSG's OVI, FVAP briefed an initial concept for the MBTP to the USPS and the MPSA. The concept of a ballot tracking pilot focused on the use of preassigned barcodes on a voter's blank ballot envelope and a preassigned Label 11-DoD for the voter's return ballot envelope to support full circle tracking of military ballots operating within the MPS (i.e., ballots delivered or returned from APO, FPO addresses). Military personnel overseas would then be able to retrieve tracking information on both their blank ballot en route to their overseas location or their voted ballot en route to their local election official. CSG supported the overall project financially and solicited involvement from the local election official members of its working groups operating as part of its OVI, and assisted in project management and administrative support.

Implementation

After the initial briefing on the MBTP, the federal stakeholders established a memorandum of agreement to structure the pilot initiative and establish clear lines of accountability based on the shared principles of customer service and obtaining quality research. Frequent project meetings were held to identify the "as-is" environment for military balloting and tracking infrastructure to guide the scope and design of the pilot.

During the initial planning stages, all the principals (CSG, the USPS, FVAP and the MPSA) identified the inherent risk involved with developing and implementing a pilot initiative during a presidential election. All stakeholders understood that a presidential election was the least preferential time to deploy a pilot initiative as it injects risk into an already sensitive environment. With this caution in mind, all the pilot participants began to document the existing environment and infrastructure for tracking of military ballots overseas. The principals formalized key areas of responsibility to ensure that all aspects of the MBTP were assigned to the appropriate responsible party.

MBTP Project Areas of Responsibility

The Council of State Governments

- Lead sponsor and project funding source
- Project management and administrative support

Federal Voting Assistance Program

- Lead facilitator for project
- Primary researcher for post-pilot data

United States Postal Service

- Key technical asset for guidance
- Technical support for setup and configuration

Military Postal Service Agency

- Key technical assets for guidance with MPOs
- Standardize guidance to MPO clerk for scanning

Local Election Officials

- Key implementer of program specifications

Early project discussions focused on clarifying the existing business rules and technical infrastructure to support the pilot program. Currently, IMb® barcodes provide tracking to one of two gateway points (Chicago and Miami) prior to entering the MPSA network, at that point any blank ballots lose visibility. (Existing MPSA processes provide tracking on parcels, but not letters or flats.) Once a military voter receives a ballot, votes it, and returns it to an MPO, each ballot receives a Label 11-DoD, which is manually applied to the envelope by military postal clerks. This barcoded tracking number provides full tracking visibility from the time of scan acceptance, to first formal entry point into the MPS, to delivery at the local election office. Therefore, when looking at consideration of the MBTP, the primary gap remained in the tracking of blank ballots within the MPSA network en route to the voter.

The USPS uses in-stream processing⁵ automation to capture IMb® tracking information. However, MPOs are not equipped to scan IMb® barcodes in the field, mainly due to the supporting logistics and existing business processes for handling standard envelopes versus parcels. MPO clerks are equipped with barcode scanners and regularly scan parcels that have an Intelligent Mail® Package Barcode, or IMpb®, but they do not currently do this for letters or flats with an IMb®. The MBTP project team focused on leveraging existing MPO business processes to support the pilot and lower the overall risk in execution of the project. Consensus quickly pointed to the need for processing these ballot materials as parcels and

using existing products offered by the USPS. The MBTP federal stakeholders considered the development of a new product for the pilot; however, the level of risk this could inject into the process and the ability to support the fielding of a new product could not be resolved within the time allotted for the MBTP. Therefore, Click-N-Ship® Business Pro™ downloadable software, an existing USPS® product platform, was leveraged as the primary tool to support the preparation of prograde MBTP materials (that is, those sent from the continental United States to overseas MPOs).

Federal law, as authorized under UOCAVA, grants the expedited return of voted ballots from overseas military personnel during a general election only. Therefore, in order to qualify for the expedited return of balloting materials, the Label 11-DoD would have to be integrated into the MBTP.



Figure 2: The MBTP integrated the Label 11-DoD into the process to take full advantage of the free postage and expedited level of service for voted ballots. Graphic courtesy of the USPS.

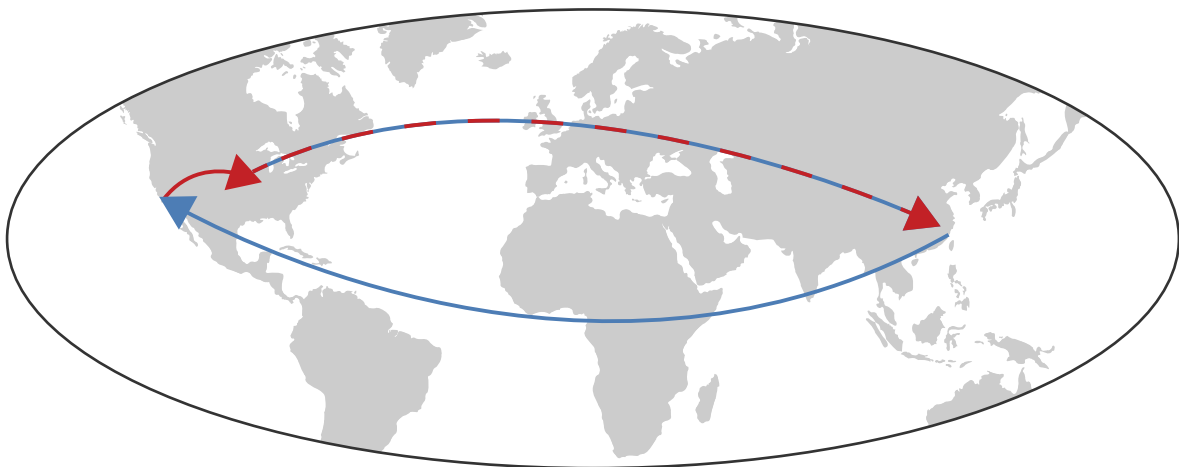


Figure 1: The graphic above demonstrates the gap (red) that exists based on the existing infrastructure to track military ballots. This image depicts a ballot dispatched from Orange County, California to a Military Post Office in Chicago and on to the military voter in Southeast Asia. The return ballot is tracked using the Label 11-DoD tracking label applied at Military Post Offices (see **Figure 2**).

Setting the Course

The MBTP federal stakeholders identified key business requirements that would support the execution of the pilot project. These elements consisted of the following:

1. All prograde (i.e., outbound from the election office to the voter) ballots for military personnel serving overseas would be processed for IMpb® tracking through the USPS Click-N-Ship® Business Pro™ downloadable software.
2. Postage for these blank balloting materials would be paid for by CSG through its FVAP cooperative agreement.
3. Parcel shipping envelopes would be provided by the USPS.
4. The Label 11-DoD would be dispatched and staged at each participating local election office for direct application for the return envelopes.
5. Each assigned return ballot envelope, with the Label 11-DoD attached, would be placed inside the prograde parcel envelope.
6. Prograde and retrograde (i.e., voted ballot returning from voter to local election office) barcode pairings would be associated with a voter record to assist with customer service and overall tracking.
7. Voters would access official scan information via the USPS® Track a Package application.

These agreed upon business requirements demonstrated a high-level consensus; however, they needed to be tested and refined in a realistic election setting. The Orange County (California) Registrar of Voters agreed to facilitate testing of the initial planning stages of the MBTP. The cooperation of the Orange County Registrar of Voters was a critical point of success for the MBTP, as it allowed for the development and refinement of the overall MBTP approach before introducing it to the five remaining election jurisdiction participants in the MBTP. Ultimately, the Orange County Registrar of Voters became the test site for the initial design work of the MBTP. In the spring of 2016, the MBTP developed a test that verified the technical requirements of the MBTP design, but did not include applying the Label 11-DoD. Orange County used Click-N-Ship® Business Pro™ downloadable software, which incorporates IMpb® barcodes, to verify alignment with existing parcel-scanning operations throughout the MPSA network.

The Orange County Registrar of Voters prepared a test mailing using the specifications shown in Figure 3 and dispatched materials to 23 Installation Voting Assistance Offices located around the world. Military personnel were instructed to complete a brief questionnaire and mail the return envelope immediately. Based on the results of this preliminary test, instructions were developed for use by the remaining five local election jurisdictions participants in the MBTP in preparation for the November 2016 general election. Orange County staff also confirmed the ease with which the USPS® product and procedures were accommodated.

Early on, scalability of the solution was flagged as a risk point – which became a persistent theme throughout the pilot. Each participating election jurisdiction would have to manually prepare the envelope packages for each overseas military personnel from their jurisdiction. This immediately suggested the need for an automated solution in the future.



Two-Way Military Ballot Barcode Tracking:

- Outbound – Priority Mail -- unmarked ballots



Priority Mail Label with barcode (IMpb) for ballot sent to voter.

- Return – Priority Mail Express – marked ballots



Nested Priority Mail Express ballot return envelope containing pre-affixed and pre-assigned Priority Mail Express Barcode (Label 11-DoD), Official Election Mail Logo and LEO office address. Enables full visibility of voter's unmarked and then marked ballot in transit.

Figure 3: Design of the MBTP ballot packages. Figure 3 reflects the generation of parcel shipping labels on the ballot envelope and the application of the Label 11-DoD on the return envelope. Graphic courtesy of the USPS and FVAP.

With the successful conclusion of the Orange County test, MBTP orchestrators (CSG, FVAP, USPS and MPSA) formalized the design of the pilot parameters and hosted a webinar in June 2016 with all six participating local election jurisdictions to conduct a walkthrough on the approach. During this webinar, Escambia County (Florida) recognized the importance of leveraging existing balloting materials and instructions from the local election office to minimize the disruption to the voters' experience. Any deviation to the standard voter instructions would create voter confusion and lead to an increase in ballot rejection risk if voters failed to properly sign returned balloting materials. Based on this discussion, the following additional features were incorporated into the official MBTP mail piece contents:

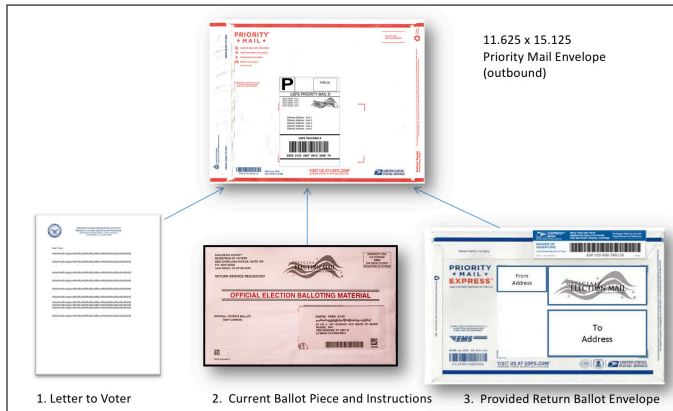
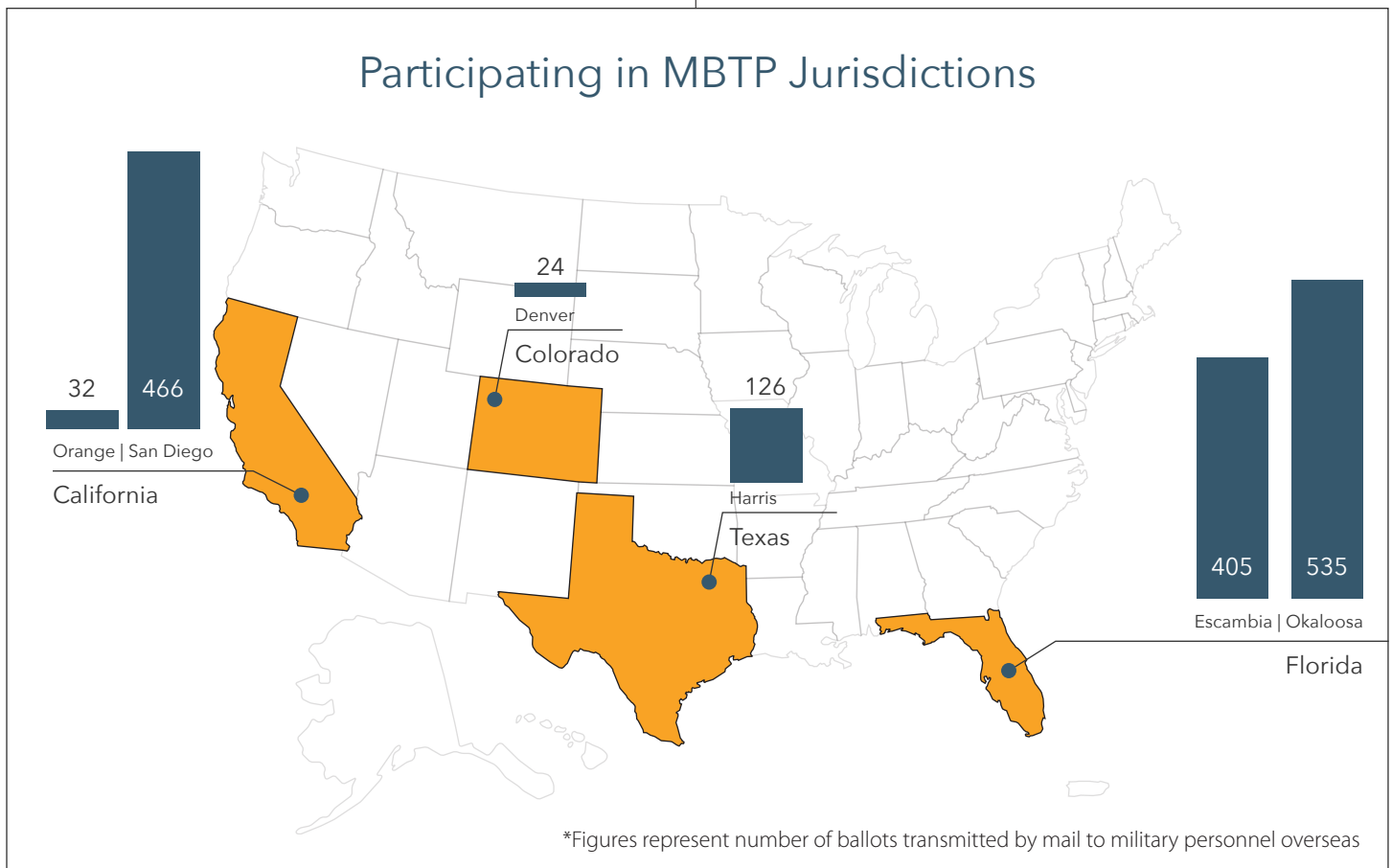


Figure 4: Official MBTP final mailpiece design. Image reflects official contents and packaging for MBTP participants. Graphic courtesy of the USPS and FVAP.

The final mailpiece design for the MBTP consisted of a letter from the FVAP director, the official ballot envelope used by each local election jurisdiction, and the ballot return envelope with a pre-affixed Label 11-DoD. All of these contents would be placed into a large prograde parcel envelope with a shipping label generated from Click-N-Ship® Business Pro™ downloadable software. Each local election official would assign barcodes to the voter records and notify all voters qualified for processing under the MBTP how to access tracking information on USPS.com®.

The USPS provided direct customer support to each local election official on how to operate Click-N-Ship® Business Pro™ downloadable software to ensure no disruptions with postage processing. By Sept. 23, 2016, all ballots were dispatched to existing absentee ballot applicants stationed at an APO/FPO address. Each election official reported prompt acceptance of the materials within the USPS mailstream, and no technical support requests were received. At this point, the MBTP pilot was in full execution and in the hands of voters to receive, vote and return their ballots.

Figure 5: Each participating MBTP jurisdiction with the corresponding number of ballots transmitted by mail to military personnel stationed overseas. The segmentation of both large and small populations for active duty personnel overseas proved valuable for understanding the impacts to local election officials during their participation and informed the consideration of future options.



Qualitative Findings

The evaluation of the MBTP consisted of a series of parts including the technical feedback from the key federal stakeholders, CSG, and each participating local election jurisdiction. These findings were intended to isolate the technical challenges with the MBTP and assist with questions about the scalability of this approach for all election jurisdictions in the United States to consider. Another piece of the evaluation consisted of a qualitative satisfaction survey sent to the voters themselves who received an MBTP parcel. The final stage of the evaluation focused on the quantitative research findings that could be pulled from the overall date/time scan event data for all ballots within the MBTP.

In February 2017, the MBTP participants convened in Louisville, Kentucky, to discuss key findings and challenges from the conduct of the pilot initiative. Key observations provided by the participating local election officials included:

1. One-hundred percent of the local election officials participating in the MBTP were satisfied or very satisfied with the MBTP.
2. One-hundred percent of the local election officials participating in the MBTP were aware or very aware of the pilot project's scope and objectives.
3. Sixty-five percent of the local election officials participating in the MBTP thought the requirements for participating were reasonable or very reasonable.
4. Sixty-five percent of the local election officials participating in the MBTP believe full ballot tracking should continue, with 35 percent undecided.

Based on feedback from the participating jurisdictions, the manual application of shipping labels and assembly of envelopes were the most onerous parts of the process. This raised concerns over the long-term viability of the MBTP as a permanent service model for overseas balloting materials, unless automation is possible through the use of a standard-sized parcel envelope to support processing through commercial mail service providers.

Other suggestions identified amongst the key participants of the MBTP included:

- Ballot tracking numbers should be printed internally by local election offices.
- Expanded size of parcel envelope limits flexibility (i.e., no window envelopes).
- Future efforts should be expanded beyond six jurisdictions.
- Validation of the overseas military addresses was the biggest challenge due to legacy absentee ballot applications and old addresses. FVAP should facilitate future work with the MPSA and the USPS to ensure UOCAVA voter address maintenance for all election officials.
- Weekly meetings were helpful for keeping on task.
- The USPS-provided envelopes were an asset.
- Expedited return and tracking of balloting materials should include all overseas voters, including non-military overseas citizens.
- Leverage proactive e-mail communication to voters to engage them throughout the process.

Voter Satisfaction

The most valuable data came from the military voters themselves, via the satisfaction survey they were sent from their respective local election jurisdictions. The survey had 14 questions that primarily asked about whether they had received ballot materials, used the tracking system for their blank and voted ballot, and how satisfied they were with the materials and tracking system. Of participating voters, 98 percent were satisfied or very satisfied with the conduct of the MBTP, and 87 percent were confident or very confident their ballot would be counted in the election.

The vast majority of respondents said they were satisfied and found the process easy. Nearly all respondents answered that they were satisfied with the email instructions, found it easy to use the ballot tracking process and found the instructions easy to navigate.

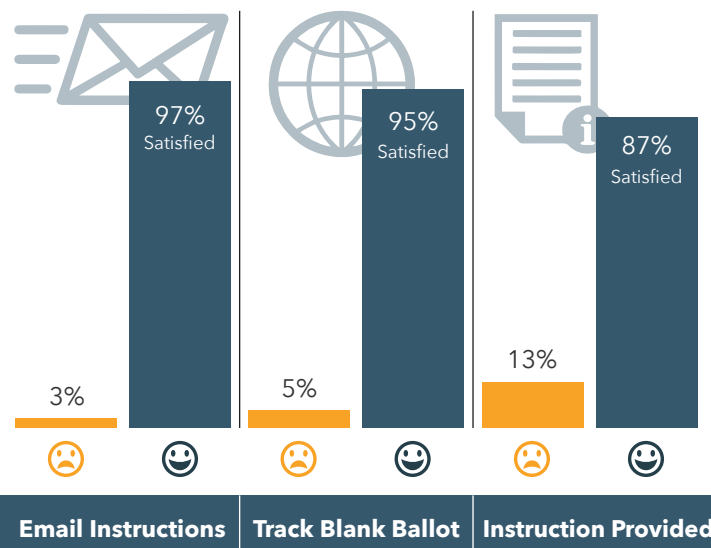


Figure 6: MBTP participating voters expressed satisfaction levels for various segments of the process and the instructions provided.

Other military voters provided general comments on their impressions of the MBTP:

"This service is fantastic. Please keep doing this. We no longer have to wonder if our ballots are going to make it. There is total transparency and it makes me feel confident that my vote counted!"

"It was very reassuring to receive an email from your office letting me know that my ballot was received and counted."

"There needs to be some way to act upon the tracking information. It is good to see where my ballot is at any particular time, but if it sits in Chicago for five days and thus makes it late, the tracking is useless without some way to expedite it when it stagnates as the deadline looms."

"Maybe better instructions on if you can [mail from] your personal post box at home."

It should be noted that the USPS and the MPSA find it much easier to act upon individual parcel tracking numbers, which is one of the additional benefits with providing life-cycle tracking of balloting materials. By leveraging a unique tracking ID, a voter may be able to identify where his or her ballot is in the process and request assistance directly from the USPS and the MPSA should it remain delayed, allowing the USPS and the MPSA to better identify the source of any issue and correct any ballot delivery issues. The use of the tracking information also improves local election officials' ability to assist.

Among users of the MBTP tracking service, 82 percent were very satisfied. Of the voters who did not use the tracking information available to them, 62 percent said they were satisfied with the service. Fifty respondents commented on why they did not check the status of their blank ballot. They primarily said:

- 1) They trusted the system, meaning they trusted their ballot would be delivered.
- 2) The ballot arrived so quickly after they received the notice that it wasn't necessary to check.
- 3) They were busy with work or life.

All of these qualitative findings point to a service that was very well-received for those who used it. For those who didn't use it, overall satisfaction registered based on the knowledge that it was there for their use should it become necessary.

Technical Findings

The total number of ballots processed through the MBTP was 1,588. All ballots were mailed to active duty military personnel who requested that a ballot be mailed to a APO/FPO address for the 2016 general election. Ballots were sent from three jurisdictions with larger military populations: San Diego (California), Escambia (Florida), and Okaloosa (Florida) and three jurisdictions with smaller military populations: Orange (California) Denver (Colorado), and Harris (Texas).

The MBTP was designed to capture data on the following research questions:

1. What percentage of ballots was successfully tracked and returned?
2. How uniform is the scanning data throughout the tracking process?
3. Were there regional differences between military mailboxes in Asia, Europe, and the Americas?
4. How long did the absentee voting process take overall and by segments?

In terms of defining success of the MBTP, there are multiple ways to define a successful pilot. CSG and FVAP identified the following questions to measure success:

1. Could the delivery of the blank ballot delivered to the voter be confirmed? Fifty-eight percent of blank ballots received a final delivery scan.
2. Was the voted ballot returned? Sixty-one percent of all ballots were returned.

This measure for confirmation of successful delivery to the voter was adjusted upward after reviewing the preassigned barcodes for each voter and reconciling the scan data with known anomalies and feed-back from the MPSA. Most notable was the lack of delivery scans for ballot materials delivered to community mailrooms and not individuals which explains why the percentage of ballots returned exceeds the

percentage of blank ballots confirmed as received. Since ballot deliveries to community mailrooms, for example, would not result in a final delivery confirmation, additional analysis was necessary to develop a better assessment on overall ballot delivery success.

The data analysis then looked to develop a cumulative picture of the scan events and all available points to assess the overall ballot delivery success:

1. **Tracked Anywhere:** One-hundred percent of ballots had at least one scanned tracking entry. This means a voter could visit the tracking system and at least see some evidence that his or her ballot was on the way.
2. **USPS® Delivery Notice:** Fifty-eight percent of ballots had a USPS delivery notice. This means a voter could visit the tracking system and know for sure that his or her ballot was delivered. This is important since active duty military may need to visit their MPO to retrieve their ballot, instead of having their ballot hand-delivered to a personal mailbox.
3. **Reached MPO:** Seventy-six percent of blank ballots reached an MPO on their outbound journey. This does not guarantee it was the correct MPO, but it is strongly correlated with the destination ZIP Code™ based on the existing absentee ballot application on file with the local election office.
4. **Reached Destination ZIP Code™:** Sixty-eight percent of ballots reached the destination ZIP Code™ identified by each jurisdiction. This was calculated by comparing the jurisdiction destination ZIP Code™ to the last valid outbound ZIP Code™.

Since the overall intent for the MBTP was to assess the delivery and processing of balloting materials within the USPS and the MPSA mailstream, CSG and FVAP combined a series of measures to demonstrate the overall effectiveness of mail ballot delivery. Most importantly, it became necessary to control for voter behavior that may result in the lack of an updated address, a potential gap in business processing when applying an appropriate scan, and the need to respect the operational nuances for each MPO (i.e., presence of community mailrooms).

5. **Final Ballot Destination Determined:** Ninety-three percent of ballots either reached an MPO, reached their destination ZIP Code™, had a USPS delivery notice, or were successfully returned to their jurisdiction—indicating that the ballot arrived to the voter but it did not show in the data.

Overall findings:

- An estimated 85-90 percent of all ballots were successfully delivered to destination APOs/FPOs. This calculation was a result of the overall data analysis with additional validation reported from FVAP's 2016 Post-Election Survey of active duty military personnel, in which 83 percent reported receiving their ballots. Given the margin of error and all circumstances, the projection of 85-90 percent delivery success is a reasonable approximation for measuring the delivery of ballots to destinations.
- Variability with the application of parcel scans requires further analysis to better identify proxies for identifying successful deliveries and isolating key milestones for voter visibility.
- MPS far exceeded the seven-day service level target with average return time of 4 days.

TRACKING DATA: Ballot Time (By Segment)

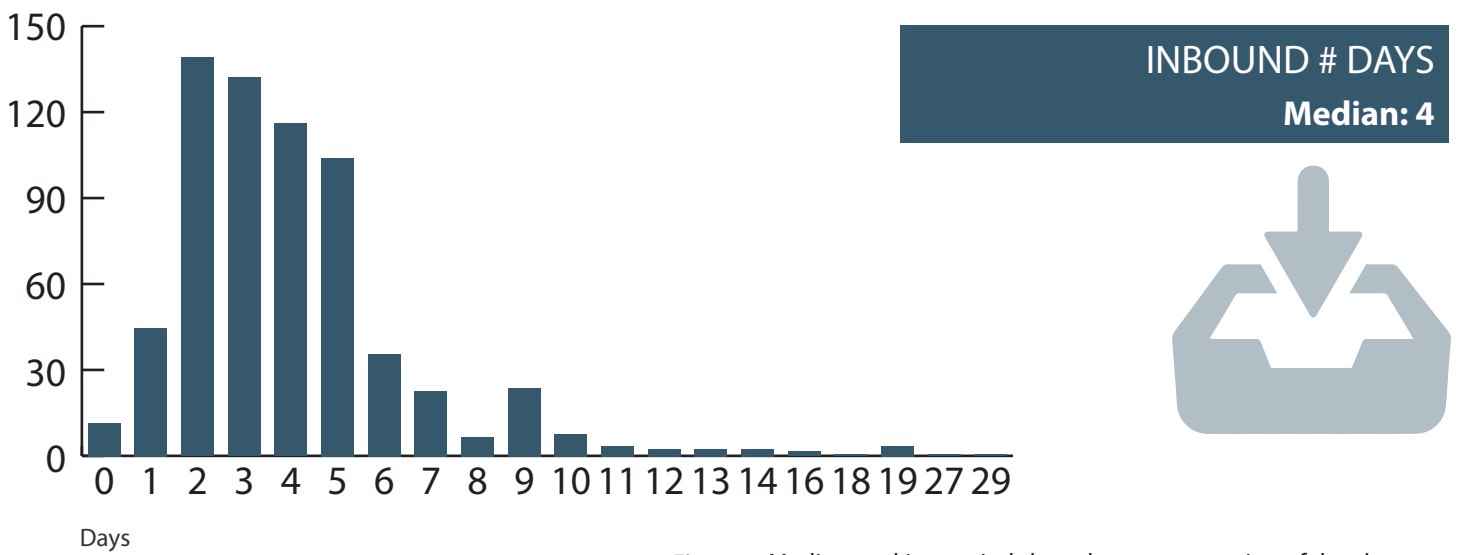
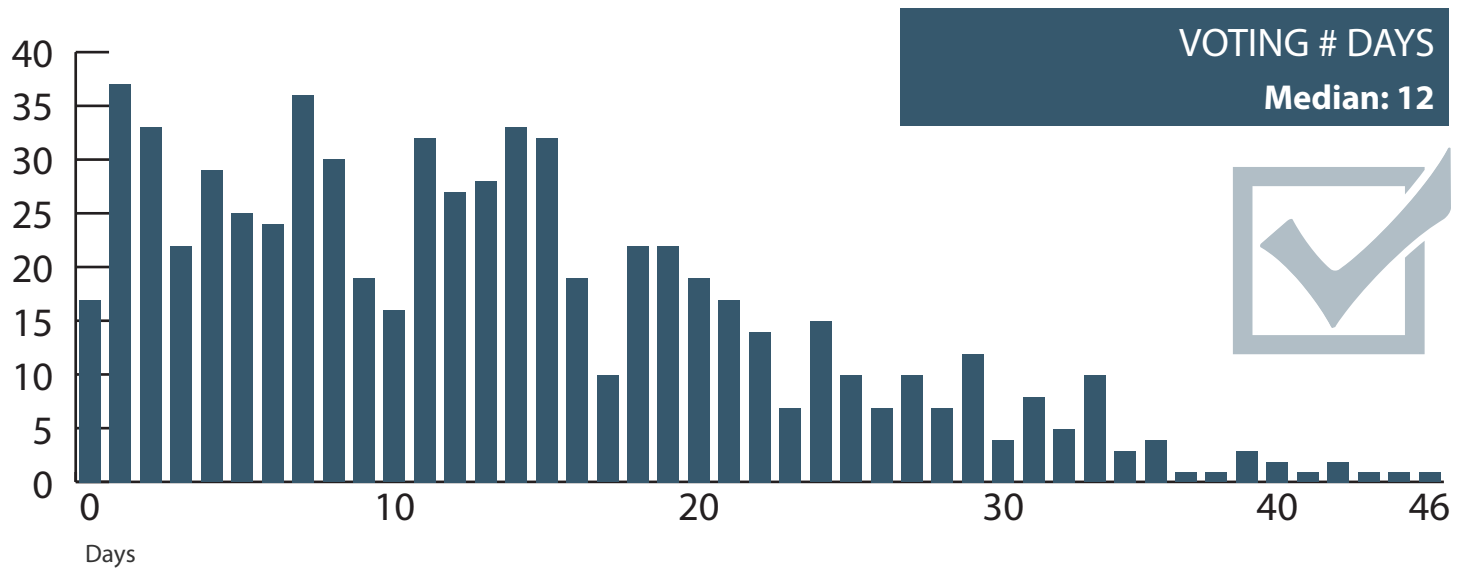
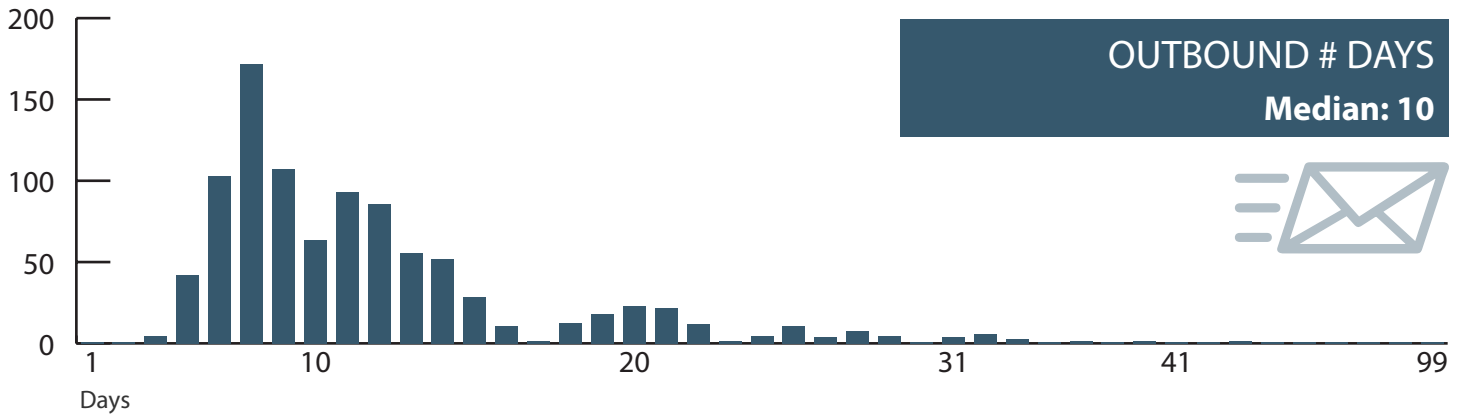


Figure 8: Median tracking periods based on segmentation of the absentee voting process for active duty military personnel stationed overseas.

TRACKING DATA

Average ballot transit time for MBTP ballots when isolating Armed Forces Europe and Armed Forces Pacific:

- Armed Forces Europe (AE): prograde—10 days, retrograde—three days.
 - Armed Forces Pacific (AP): prograde—11 days, retrograde—four days.
 - Ballots sent to AE installations were slightly more likely to be successfully scanned and returned and have final destination scans applied confirming delivery (13 percent).
 - Across the vast majority of measures, ballots transmitted to AE and AP regions performed very similarly. AE took a median 27 days and AP a median 30 days to complete the absentee ballot process. Ballots sent to AP regions at the median took one day longer to reach the voter, one day longer to vote, one day longer inbound time and one day longer transit time.
1. The median prograde ballot took 10 days to reach its last recorded destination. This calculation is based on the date provided by the participating local election office for when the ballot was mailed.
 2. The median time a voter held on to the ballot before voting and submitting it to the MPO for return was 12 days.
 3. The median retrograde ballot took 4 days between the date of mailing and the date that the participating local election office reported receiving it.

It is important to note that the median retrograde transit time was about 2.5 times as fast as the prograde transit time. This is indicative of the differences in the delivery timeframes under UOCAVA. UOCAVA requires that materials be sent “expeditiously” and that voters mail their marked ballots back to election officials no later than seven days before a federal election. To satisfy this timeline, delivery of the voted ballots must be completed in seven days or less. The USPS and the MPSA exceeded this metric for most of the ballots returned in the MBTP.

Additionally, the analysis of scan data illustrated the impact of outdated address information provided from overseas voters and how it can significantly increase the number of scans and delivery time:

1. The average prograde blank ballot that was delivered and successfully returned was scanned in 11 different ZIP Code™ areas.
2. The average prograde blank ballot was scanned in 5 different ZIP Code™ areas.

ZIP Codes™ are a good proxy for how many locations a ballot travels to before reaching the voter. Each MPO is assigned to a particular ZIP Code™, so an increase in the number of ZIP Code™ areas traversed indicates a ballot being processed in search of a voter. Retrograde ballots tended to travel to three more ZIP Code™ locations, on average, than prograde ballots. Although

these voted ballots traveled to three more ZIP Code™ locations, the class of service attributed to the expedited treatment of the Label-11 DoD label led to faster processing times and explains apparent contradiction. Two hundred sixty-two (262) ballots were classified as return to sender. These ballots had a median number of 21 scans and passed through a median of eight ZIP Codes™. This analysis on the impact of ZIP Code™ scans stresses the importance of active maintenance of absentee voting requests for voters covered under UOCAVA and the underlying value of the Label 11-DoD expedited service. It also underscores the need for military personnel to update their absentee voting information with the completion of a Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA, each time they change duty station.

It is important to note that the technical data from a pilot like the MBTP is rich and complex, but it is also just a baseline. While the MBTP can inform and educate future efforts, it is important to note that future efforts will need to isolate and reassess specific data points to more effectively isolate mail delivery success.

Conclusion

Postal mail is a critical component of the absentee voting process for UOCAVA citizens. To learn more about postal mail challenges, FVAP worked with CSG’s OVI, the MPSA, the USPS, and six local jurisdictions to conduct this successful pilot for the 2016 general election.

The pilot program was the first of its kind to provide full life-cycle tracking of ballots throughout the USPS-MPSA network. It increased customer service for voters and will provide valuable research data to help identify areas for improvement on both a federal and local level. Key findings from the MBTP include:

- Ninety-eight percent of all active duty military voters were satisfied or very satisfied with the conduct of the MBTP.
- An estimated 85-90 percent of all ballots were successfully delivered to destination MPOs.
- Variability in the application of parcel scans requires further discussion between the USPS, the MPSA and FVAP to improve the quality of data and support more in-depth analysis.
- The USPS and the MPSA performed well below the seven-day service level target, with average retrograde transit time of 4 days.
- Expanding beyond pilot-level participants will require a more scalable solution and parcel envelopes that support automated processing through commercial mail service providers.

FVAP has a responsibility to educate stakeholders and voters on the complexities associated with absentee voting, especially for military personnel stationed overseas. The conduct of pilot projects, like the MBTP, demonstrate the need for greater infrastructure to provide positive reinforcement for these voters who find themselves geographically separate while serving our nation’s defense. Voting is a learned behavior.

ior, so one positive experience will help dispel misperceptions about the acceptance of military ballots in the process and will encourage future voter engagement.

Most importantly, all the federal stakeholders felt the following steps should be taken into consideration for future efforts:

1. A future MBTP-like program that uses parcel shipping for ballots would benefit from the USPS developing a new parcel-envelope size to permit automated processing of blank ballots to military voters.
2. All principal agencies should clearly identify those data elements that should be included in public gateways to raise voter awareness, but also foster one standardized definition of ballot delivery success.
3. The USPS should explore the potential for a permanent service that builds on this pilot program's success, for use by all local election jurisdictions for UOCAVA voters.
4. FVAP and the MPSA should work together with the USPS to educate local election officials on the importance of conforming to new military addressing standards and best practices for list maintenance of active duty military personnel stationed overseas.
5. FVAP, the MPSA and the USPS should work in conjunction to establish a delivery standard and definition for the delivery of blank ballots in all federal elections, similar to that established under UOCAVA for the expedited return of voted ballots in federal general elections.

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Endnotes

¹Information about The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment, or MOVE, Act can be found here: www.justice.gov/opa/pr/fact-sheet-move-act

²Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of UOCAVA information can be found here: www.fvap.gov/info/laws/uocava

³FVAP's report, "Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges" can be found here: https://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Reports/FVAP_QualitativeResearch_20150731_final.pdf

⁴FVAP's report, "Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act Voting: Successes and Challenges" can be found here: https://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/Reports/FVAP_QualitativeResearch_20150731_final.pdf

⁵In-Stream Processing is a powerful technology that can scan huge volumes of data coming from sensors, credit card swipes, clickstreams and other inputs, and find actionable insights nearly instantaneously. See: <https://blog.griddynamics.com/what-is-in-stream-processing>

ABOUT CSG

Founded in 1933, The Council of State Governments is our nation's only organization serving all three branches of state government. CSG is a region-based forum that fosters the exchange of insights and ideas to help state officials shape public policy. This offers unparalleled regional, national and international opportunities to network, develop leaders, collaborate and create problem-solving partnerships.

ABOUT OVI

Many active duty military personnel are located in remote areas abroad and have limited access to state voting information and, in some cases, their ballot. U.S. citizens living overseas also have unique challenges in exercising their right to vote. These challenges are complicated by extreme variation in how states conduct elections and how absentee ballots are processed. In late 2013, CSG and FVAP entered into a four-year cooperative agreement to improve the research and understanding surrounding the complex nature of the voting process for service members, their families and U.S. citizens living abroad.



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