Overseas Voting:

Strategies for Engaging Every Voter

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Foreword

From The Council of State Governments' OVI Policy Working Group Co-chairs

As co-chairs of The Council of State Governments Overseas Voting Initiative Policy Working Group, it is our great pleasure to release the detailed report concerning the working group's recommendations to improve the voting experience for our military and overseas voters. In late 2013, The Council of State Governments, or CSG, and the U.S. Department of Defense Federal Voting Assistance Program, or FVAP, entered into a four-year partnership to improve the voting process for service members, their families and U.S. citizens living abroad. One component of the CSG Overseas Voting Initiative, or OVI, was the creation of a Policy Working Group composed of state and local election officials. We—Kim Wyman, Washington secretary of state, and David Stafford, supervisor of elections for Escambia County, Florida—had the pleasure of working with the following talented and dedicated election officials on the Policy Working Group:

- Secretary of State Kim Wyman, Washington
- Supervisor of Elections David Stafford, Escambia County, Florida
- Secretary of State Jim Condos, Vermont
- Executive Director Lance Gough, Board of Election Commissioners, Chicago
- Secretary of State Jon A. Husted, Ohio
- Director of Elections Keith Ingram, Texas
- Director and General Counsel Kevin Kennedy, Government Accountability Board, Wisconsin
- Senior Adviser Tammy Patrick, Bipartisan Policy Center
- Director of Elections Gary Poser, Minnesota
- Registrar of Voters Michael Vu, San Diego County, California

As the foundation of this work effort, the OVI Policy Working Group examined successful programs and practices across the country as well as recommendations from the Presidential Commission on Election Administration related to military and overseas voting. The OVI Policy Working Group met in person in San Antonio, Texas; Pensacola, Florida; and Orange County, California. These locations were chosen for their proximity to U.S. military installations, which facilitated conversations with local military voting assistance officers and installation commanders. In San Antonio and Pensacola, we were able to make onsite visits to the installations. Our meetings also included presentations from academics, election data analysts, U.S. Election Assistance Commissioners, Federal Voting Assistance Program officials, and state and local election officials. The OVI Policy Working Group also held several teleconference meetings as we worked toward our final recommendations.

The product of the OVI Policy Working Group is the result of the collaboration of a bipartisan assemblage of elected and appointed officials and should be viewed as the collaborative work of the committee, not necessarily representing the positions or beliefs of any individual working group member. Although the members of the working group represent a wide diversity of voting populations, we all experience similar challenges when it comes to providing ballots to military and overseas voters, and are likewise committed to improving the process. Our policy recommendations reflect a commonsense, actionable and practical approach to facilitating the overseas voting process regardless of jurisdiction size or structure. Our recommendations include:

Voter Communication:

- Use plain language.
- Make effective use of election websites and social media platforms.
- Create more user-friendly electronic ballot return envelopes.
- Communicate to voters when the ballot application is accepted.
- Provide information to voters about what is on the ballot.

Voter Registration:

- Treat the Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA, as a permanent request for voter registration.
- Establish a default validity period for the FPCA mail ballot request.
- States that provide online voter registration should incorporate online registration for military and overseas voters.

Engagement with the U.S. Military Community:

- Establish partnerships between state and local election officials and local military installations.

We encourage you to read the full report for more explanation. All of our recommendations are currently in place in some jurisdictions throughout the county and are considered best practices by the OVI Policy Working Group. With the exception of the recommendation for permanent voter registration for FPCA voters, most of the recommendations can be implemented immediately by state and local election officials without legislative changes. It is our sincere hope that this report will provide state policymakers and state and local election officials with actionable recommendations that will better serve America's military and overseas voters, and improve the rate of timely returned and counted ballots from this population.

Sincerely,

Kim Wyman
Secretary of State,
Washington

David Stafford
Supervisor of Elections,
Escambia County, Florida

CONTRIBUTORS

Secretary of State Kim Wyman, Washington

Supervisor of Elections David Stafford, Escambia County, Florida

Secretary of State Jim Condos, Vermont

Executive Director Lance Gough, Board of Election Commissioners, Chicago

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Registrar of Voters Michael Vu, San Diego County, California

Federal Voting Assistance Program, U.S. Department of Defense

The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative Policy Working Group report was developed through partnership with the Federal Voting Assistance Program, or FVAP, of the U.S. Department of Defense. CSG would like to thank FVAP Director Matt Boehmer, FVAP Director of Communications J. Scott Wiedmann and FVAP Voting Assistance Director David Beirne for their guidance in the development of the report and for their valuable reviews of its drafts.

Public Policy: A Short History of Military and Overseas Voting

Ever since the nation's founding, voting has been complicated for people serving in the military. At the time of the Revolutionary War, elections were held for colonial assemblies; however, most colonies limited the franchise to white male property owners. Because many of the soldiers fighting were working class and owned no property, they did not have voting rights. After the war ended, many states in the new nation changed their laws to allow all white males to vote but the laws still varied across states, meaning that a soldier's right to vote depended on the state in which he resided.[1]

The issue of military voting was relatively dormant until the U.S. Civil War and the 1864 presidential election. In 18 Northern states, military voters were permitted to vote absentee. After the Civil War, more states passed absentee voting laws, some specifically designed for the military voter.

By 1918, 28 of the 48 states had absentee voting laws on the books, most catering to military personnel. However, soldiers who were deployed in Europe for World War I were generally unable to vote because transit time for mail to soldiers did not

allow for it. During World War II, Congress passed the Soldier Voting Act, requiring states to create a federal ballot that would allow soldiers to vote for federal offices. States could also include state and local races, however, complex and restrictive voter registration laws, combined with mail transit time issues, meant that voting was relatively difficult for military personnel in both the 1942 and 1944 elections.

Voting difficulties among military personnel continued through the Korean War. In response, Congress enacted the Federal Voting Assistance Act, or FVAA, in 1955. This law required the president to designate an executive agency to coordinate and facilitate voting for federal offices by members of the military and federally employed overseas citizens. The FVAA required the creation of a standard post card application form for registration and requesting a ballot; however, states were not required to accept this form. The law also requested that states simplify their absentee registration processes and provide adequate time for ballots to be mailed and returned. The Federal Voting Assistance Program, housed within the U.S. Department of Defense, can trace its roots back to this 1955 legislation.

In 1975, Congress passed the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act, which gave overseas citizens who were eligible to vote in federal elections the right to vote in the state in which they last resided immediately prior to their departure from the United States.

In 1986, Congress passed the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, commonly known as UOCAVA, which continues to serve as the national framework for overseas and military voting today. UOCAVA established a Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA, that all states were required to accept as a request for an absentee ballot and voter registration. Among other things, UOCAVA provided for postage-free mailing of FPCAs and other balloting materials and required states to accept the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot if overseas and military voters did not receive a regular mail ballot in time.

The close presidential election of 2000 drew attention to all aspects of election administration, including the ballots cast by military and overseas voters. Press stories and research on overseas and military voting identified variation in how states treated UOCAVA ballots. For example, states vary in how many days after an election an overseas ballot could be received and counted and whether a postmark was required. In response to these variations, the Help America Vote Act, or HAVA, in 2002, and the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002 both included provisions that sought to impose some uniformity across the states in how they treat overseas voters. For example, states were required to designate a single state office to serve overseas voters, accept an FPCA as valid for a period of two federal general elections, collect and report data on UOCAVA voters, and accept a standard oath for all voting documents.

Despite these reforms, data collected by the Election Assistance Commission and the Federal Voting Assistance Program between 2004 and 2009 found that UOCAVA voters still faced significant challenges. Several studies found that rates of ballots returned and counted for military and overseas voters were well below those of the general population.[2] In 2009, Congress passed the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment—or MOVE–Act, which aimed to increase the acceptance rate of UOCAVA ballots. The MOVE Act required that states mail ballots to UOCAVA voters no later than 45 days before an election for federal offices and also required that election officials send out the blank ballot electronically, upon a voter's request. Data show that the MOVE Act resulted in significantly increased acceptance rates for UOCAVA ballots.

Overseas and military voters are now supported by federal and state laws that protect their right to vote. However, even with these strong legal protections, the practical reality is that voting from remote locations can present significant challenges that voters at home do not face. Election officials and policymakers continue to explore ways to reduce barriers for overseas voters

and improve the return rate of their ballots. Like all election laws, the laws affecting overseas and military voters will continue to evolve as needed to overcome voting obstacles as they are identified and to incorporate improvements in technology to facilitate voting.

CSG Overseas Voting Initiative: Policy Working Group

The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative's Policy Working Group was comprised of state and local election officials from across the United States, along with other experts in election administration, who came together to identify ways in which the election experience for UOCAVA voters could be improved. Working together, the group identified three primary areas where state and local governments can improve the UOCAVA process: voter registration, communication and outreach.

Voters need to be able to register easily as well as truly understand and learn about the election process and understand the issues they face. The recommendations of the group reflect the fact that there are many simple actions that election officials can take to improve the voting process. Most of the recommended improvements—especially those related to communication and outreach—will benefit all voters, not just the UOCAVA population. ☑

Voter Registration

Registering to vote is a critical aspect of the voting process. Without accurate registration records, the government cannot know who is or is not eligible to vote. Registration is also an activity that places certain burdens on the voter, who has to remember to correctly register and to legibly complete the right form, and on the election office, which has to process the registration request. Over the past 25 years, there have been many efforts to simplify the voter registration process and strengthen the process of authenticating a person's eligibility to vote. For example, the National Voter Registration Act, or NVRA, allows individuals to register to vote when they apply for a driver's license or other government services.

Registration has long been an issue for members of the uniformed services, their dependents and overseas citizens. The difficulties they face include variation in state voter registration requirements that can make the process confusing and postal reliability problems in certain countries. Over time, registration has become easier for all Americans, including those covered by UOCAVA. The Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA, has been a key improvement to the registration process but, more recently, online registration has made registering to vote even easier. As demonstrated by both the FPCA and online voter registration small improvements to processes can ease the burden of registration for UOCAVA citizens.

Voter Registration: The FPCA

For members of the uniformed services, overseas citizens and the dependents of military and overseas citizens, registering to vote can be difficult. Challenges overseas voters face include variations in state voter registration requirements that can make the process confusing and postal reliability problems in certain countries. One of the most important solutions to the voter registration problem was the creation of the FPCA. The FPCA was designed to simplify the voter registration and ballot

Overseas Voting Recommendations

The Overseas Voting Initiative is a partnership between The Council of State Governments, or CSG, and the U.S. Department of Defense Federal Voting Assistance Program. The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative Policy Working Group makes the following recommendations:

Voter Communication

- Use plain language.
- Make effective use of election websites and social media.
- Create more user-friendly electronic ballot return envelopes.
- Communicate to voters when the ballot application is accepted
- Provide information to voters about what is on the ballot.

Improved Engagement

- Establish partnerships between state and local election officials and local military installations.

✉ Voter Registration

- States that provide online voter registration should incorporate online registration for overseas and military voters.
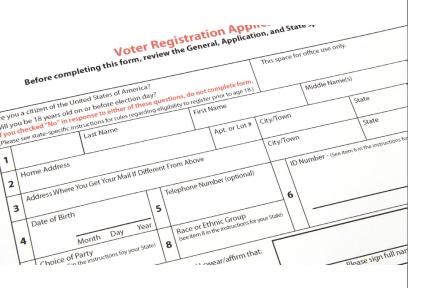- Treat the FPCA as a permanent request for voter registration.
- Establish a default validity period for the FPCA mail ballot request.

request processes for UOCAVA citizens by having one form serve both roles.

Two key issues that UOCAVA citizens face are (1) whether the state makes a citizen who registers using an FPCA a permanently registered voter or only allows their registration to remain active for the time the FPCA absentee ballot request is valid, and (2) the length of time that a state allows the FPCA absentee ballot request to remain active.

States currently follow different processes concerning how they register UOCAVA voters. Some states require that the FPCA be treated as a temporary voter registration effective for the purpose of issuing an absentee ballot by mail. The temporary voter registration expires upon the expiration of the FPCA. Other states treat the FPCA like any other voter registration request and add the UOCAVA voter to the permanent voter rolls. The variation in how states treat FPCA voter registration can cause confusion for FPCA voters.

For many young military personnel, their legal voting residence is their parents' home and, for many of them, this does not change during their time on active duty. In addition, a recent

survey of overseas voters found that 43 percent of overseas citizens who voted in the 2014 general election had lived at their current overseas address for seven or more years. It can be a burden for overseas citizens who have lived overseas for several elections to reregister each year. Processing the FPCA as a permanent voter registration would ensure that military personnel and overseas citizens remain registered to vote.

In addition to the variation in how states register UOCAVA voters, there is also considerable variation between states concerning how long the FPCA request for mail ballot remains effective. HAVA required that a voter registration request under UOCAVA be effective from the date it is filed through the next two regularly scheduled federal general elections. However, this federal requirement was repealed by the passage of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment, or MOVE, Act. Currently, state laws governing the length of FPCA validity vary widely.

The prior HAVA requirement, which allowed an FPCA ballot request to remain effective for a period of two federal general elections, sometimes resulted in ballots being mailed to bad addresses. A period covering two federal general elections can be up to four years, and it is not uncommon for a UOCAVA voter's

mailing address to change within such a timeframe. Once the HAVA validity period for the FPCA ballot request was repealed, states adopted various periods of validity for FPCA ballot requests and some states fell back on the prior one-calendar-year rule. A one-calendar-year validity period, however, can cause other problems. For example, if a UOCAVA voter submits an FPCA ballot request in September of an odd-numbered year, then the ballot request will not be valid for the March primary that occurs the following spring. In effect, the FPCA ballot request is effective only for a few months. The validity periods of FPCA ballot requests of two UOCAVA voters both stationed overseas at the same location may be very different just depending on their states of residence.

The CSG Overseas Voting Initiative Policy Working Group encourages states to develop a standard "default" validity period of not less than one full federal general election cycle for all FPCA ballot requests. If overseas citizens had an FPCA ballot request that remained effective for the year in which it was filed, as well as for the next federal election, these individuals would have a much easier experience with the voting process and states would still be able to maintain the integrity of the process. Having the ballot request remain valid through the federal general election following its receipt ensures that military and overseas citizens are able to continue to participate in federal elections while they are away from home.

Online Voter Registration

Some scholars have reported that voter participation increases when it is easier to register to vote.[3] For UOCAVA citizens, the burden associated with registration is high compared to Americans living at their permanent residence in the United States. One of the easiest ways to register to vote is through online voter registration. As of July 1, 2016, 31 states offered this form of registration, with seven additional states in the process of developing such systems. As The Pew Research Center has noted,

> Over the past decade, voters have embraced online registration for its convenience, and state officials have championed it for its accuracy, efficiency, and affordability. Electronic registration avoids many of the issues common to paper registration, including data entry errors and missing information, and saves states money by reducing or eliminating the need for paper, printing, postage, and staff time.[4]

Recent research has found that online voter registration has the potential to boost registration rates and subsequent turnout for voters who traditionally encounter increased obstacles while registering.[5] Young voters who have recently moved benefit from online voter registration. This also is the prime demographic for military personnel; 43 percent of military members are age 25 or younger.[6]

Some online voter registration advocates assert that voters benefit from online registration in a variety of ways. First, it is quick and easy, assuming a voter has the basic identification needed to register. Second, it allows them to check their registration status and information, which can help in their voting preparations and cut down on unnecessary communication with elections staff. Third, online systems help reduce errors made on registration forms. The ability to access this information on

one online site is especially helpful to overseas voters, as their communication with local offices and their access to election information may be otherwise limited.

While there are benefits to online voter registration, some states that have implemented online voter registration have not optimized the online system for UOCAVA registration. For the UOCAVA registrant, the online voter registration system needs to have several important functionalities:

- A registrant should be able to select that they are a UOCAVA voter so that they receive the protections afforded to them by having this voting status.

- It should allow a person to list their home state address (or voting address in that jurisdiction) as well as an absentee address, foreign address or APO/FPO address where the ballot should be sent. The home address is needed to determine the correct balloting style that the voter should receive and the second address is where the voter lives and will be receiving the ballot.

Having a well-designed online voter registration system that serves the UOCAVA population is a great benefit for the voter and for state and local election offices as well. The voter benefit is obvious; they can register to vote and request an absentee ballot quickly and easily. Online voter registration also reduces the time it takes voters to get voting materials to the election officials from their overseas location. For the election offices, the online voter registration systems greatly reduce labor and material costs.[7] In addition, online voter registration does away with many of the problems associated with paper voter registrations, such as incomplete forms, illegible handwriting and data entry errors. In addition, the information is generally easier to process and verify due to common data formats. Allowing the voter to enter in their own mailing address is especially important for reducing ballot transit issues related to international mail. Mailing address formats vary from country to country; enabling the voter to enter the information into a system that provides the appropriate fields for international addresses ensures that the address contains all necessary information in the correct order for the ballot to arrive on time. ☑

Voter Communication

Effective Communication

For any citizen, getting the information needed to participate in an election can take time. Even for simple tasks, such as confirming a polling place location or requesting an absentee ballot, citizens want to be able to find the information quickly and easily. For most uniformed service personnel and their dependents, as well as for overseas citizens, the internet—either a website or social media—will be the first stop on one's information search. Election officials should consider how they can use these platforms to communicate directly to their customers and how they can do so using simple language.

Document Checklist for Plain Language[35]	
Written for the average reader	Organized to serve the reader's needs
Has useful headings	Uses "you" and other pronouns to speak to the reader
Uses active voice	Uses short sections and sentences
Uses the simplest tense possible—the present tense is best; it uses base verbs, not nominalizations (hidden verbs)	Places words carefully (avoids large gaps between the subject, the verb and the object; puts exceptions last; and correctly places modifiers)
Uses concrete, familiar words	Uses "must" to express requirements; avoids the ambiguous word "shall"
Omits excess words	Uses lists and tables to simplify complex material
Uses no more than two or three subordinate levels	

Plain Language

Election administration, like any subject, is full of jargon, abbreviations and acronyms: FPCA and UOCAVA are just two examples. For people who work in elections, these terms are used regularly and are well-understood. For the citizen trying to register to vote from a foreign location or a member of the military voting while deployed, jargon can turn what should be a simple exercise into something far more difficult. The solution to this problem is to write using plain language.

When people read documents, they typically skim, scan and search for the information that allows them to complete a task or achieve some goal. According to research on adult literacy, 22 percent of Americans have basic literacy skills, meaning that they can only perform simple document tasks—such as locating a piece of information or entering information from personal knowledge onto a document—if there is little or no distracting information present. Additionally, half of all Americans find it difficult to integrate multiple pieces of information from one or more documents. Not surprisingly, individuals with lower levels of literacy are also less likely to vote.[8]

Using plain language helps to ensure that people can read and understand the information they need. Since the 1970s, presidents have encouraged federal agencies to write in plain English. In the 1990s, the Plain Language Action and Information Network, or PLAIN, was formed to disseminate plain language tools and skills to federal agencies. The Plain Language Writing Act of 2010 now requires federal agencies to ensure that all public documents are written in a way "that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience."[9]

PLAIN and plain language research recommends concise writing with headings, lists and white space, so the page can be easily scanned. Readers want to be able to find things quickly and easily so they can accomplish their task. Having unclear or unnecessary links causes many users to overlook key information.

The same plain language guidelines apply to voting information. The Center for Civic Design—civicdesign.org—has identified recommendations in its Field Guides to Ensuring Voter Intent, which discuss the use of plain language and effective design specifically in the election process. The Center for Civic Design's guides focus on topics including ballot design, writing instructions voters understand, designing voter education booklets and fliers, and creating accessible online information.[10] These guides can help election officials avoid the pitfalls that come from failing to use plain language and plain design.

For example, when reaching out to military and overseas voters, avoid using election jargon and acronyms. It is easy to forget that many of these citizens are first-time voters—in particular, military personnel ages 18 to 24 and young adults living overseas for work or educational experiences. These young citizens may be unfamiliar with the voting process and could become lost when faced with technical election language. Explaining to this audience how to register, request an absentee ballot, and vote in a clear and concise manner will result in reaching these men and women more successfully.

Plain language facilitates the voting process by ensuring that voters can understand the various steps in the voting process. For citizens covered by UOCAVA, these steps can be difficult to complete because they have to figure out the process by themselves, often with only a form and online instructions to guide them. Plain language that guides the person through the registration and ballot request process, then helps them vote and return their ballot without error, makes the electoral process work better for everyone—the voter and the election office.

Table 1: Website Usability Principles and Heuristics

Visibility of the System Status	
Visibility of the system status	The system should always keep users informed about what is going on, through appropriate feedback within reasonable time.
Match between system and the real world	The system should speak the users' language, with words, phrases and concepts familiar to the user, rather than system-oriented terms. Follow real-world conventions, making information appear in a natural and logical order.
User control and freedom	The user should control the system. The system shouldn't control the user. The user is the boss, and the system should show it. Users often choose system functions by mistake and will need a clearly marked "emergency exit" to leave the unwanted site without having to go through an extended dialogue. Support undo and redo.
Consistency and standards	Users should not have to wonder whether different words, situations, or actions mean the same thing. Follow platform conventions.
Error prevention	Even better than good error messages is a careful design that prevents a problem from occurring in the first place. Either eliminate error-prone conditions or check for them and present users with a confirmation option before they commit to the action.
Recognition rather than recall	Minimize the user's memory load by making objects, actions, and options visible. The user should not have to remember information from one part of the dialogue to another. Instructions for use of the system should be visible or easily retrievable whenever appropriate.
Flexibility and efficiency of use	Accelerators—unseen by the novice user—may often speed up the interaction for the expert user such that the system can cater to both inexperienced and experienced users. Allow users to tailor frequent actions. Shorten the distance between the user and their goal.
Aesthetic and minimalist design	Keep it neat. Keep it organized. Dialogues should not contain information that is irrelevant or rarely needed. Every extra unit of information in a dialogue competes with the relevant units of information and diminishes their relative visibility.
Help users recognize, diagnose, and recover from errors	Error messages should be expressed in plain language (no codes), precisely indicate the problem, and constructively suggest a solution.
Help and documentation	Even though it is better if the system can be used without documentation, it may be necessary to provide help and documentation. Any such information should be easy to search, focused on the user's task, list concrete steps to be carried out, and not be too large.
Affordance of the system (objects do what we expect them to do)	The objects on the screen have right affordances; clickable things look clickable. A button, by being slightly raised above an otherwise flat surface, suggests the idea of pushing it. A lever, by being an appropriate size for grasping, suggests pulling it.
Minimize the cognitive load/burden	People don't have to think too much. Don't force the user to guess and provide good examples or default values. Don't distract users by presenting a lot of elements and information. Present indispensable information.
Minimize the cognitive load/burden	People don't have to think too much. Don't force the user to guess and provide good examples or default values. Don't distract users by presenting a lot of elements and information. Present indispensable information.

Web Usability

Most UOCAVA voters use the internet to find election information. A survey of active duty military personnel conducted after the 2014 election, and a similar survey of overseas citizens who requested an absentee ballot in the 2014 election, found that UOCAVA citizens typically have some form of internet access and actively search for the information they need to participate in elections. When these citizens need election information, they are very likely to go to a search engine, type in some key words, and hopefully land on FVAP.gov or the home page of the state or local election office website that contains the key information they need to vote.

Once they arrive at the website, it needs to be well-designed and use plain language. It also needs to be user-friendly; navigating the website should be intuitive. Websites today also should be responsive; it should work across different screen sizes, devices and resolutions—from a traditional computer screen to a smartphone or tablet. It is important to remember that for many Americans mobile computing is their primary mode of accessing the internet. Many people follow candidates on social media and receive political news updates on their smartphones,[11] and up to 40 percent of smartphone users report using their phones to access government information and services.[12]

The military in particular has a large population of young voters—about 43 percent of active-duty military members are age 25 or younger[13] —so being mobile friendly is important to serving the UOCAVA population. Also, many overseas citizens have limited communication and access to U.S. election information from their locations. A mobile phone with internet access may be their only option to learn about registering to vote and access other election information.

Frequently, state or local websites that would seem to offer impressive online features are not mobile friendly. Mobile-friendly sites are designed with legible font sizes, configured to render site content to mobile screen sizes and space links appropriately.[14] Increasing the mobile friendliness of election information websites has the potential to increase access to UOCAVA voters and young military members.

There are several key heuristics for designing websites; 12 of them are listed in Table 1.[15] These heuristics provide a framework for ensuring a website is effective and easy to use. Users appreciate websites that are clearly organized, simple to navigate, have a consistent look and feel, and help people recover if they make a mistake. These heuristics provide the basis for conducting website usability tests. Usability tests are the most effective means of ensuring that a website is easy to use and satisfies the needs of all target users. For election websites, testing whether the UOCAVA user can quickly and easily complete critical tasks—registering to vote and requesting an absentee ballot, finding information about candidates and issues on the ballot, and learning about dates and deadlines for the election—is the best test of usability.

These heuristics provide an overall guide to designing websites that are effective and usable. The Center for Civic Design has a field guide, "Designing Election Department Websites," that specifically focuses on how to best serve voters. Their recommendations include showing a sample ballot when possible, organizing the site around voters' questions, and putting critical content in the center section of the webpage.[16]

There are three easy ways in which state and local election websites can make voting easier for UOCAVA citizens. The first is to ensure that their online voter registration system allows for the completion of an FPCA on the site. Second, for states without online voter registration—or who have yet to include the FPCA functionality on their site—they can link to the FPCA assistant that is available on the FVAP.gov website. This online assistant is designed to walk the user through completing the FPCA, then instruct them to print, sign and submit it to their election office. By completing the form online, problems of legibility and form completeness can be mitigated. Third, all state and local election offices can link to the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot, or FWAB, assistant on the FVAP site. This will help UOCAVA voters who do not receive an absentee ballot on time complete the write-in ballot, which they can then print and mail to the appropriate election office.

Together, the heuristic and the Civic Design guide are focused on ensuring that citizens have the best experience possible when they seek out information about how to vote. For UOCAVA voters, this information is especially critical because they are often less likely to receive election information from campaigns, interest groups and political parties, which can play a role in motivating voters to participate in elections. Instead, the state and local election office websites become key elements in a UOCAVA voter's educational toolkit. Having a website that has been tested for usability by UOCAVA citizens can ensure that they have the best experience possible. ☑

Engagement with the U.S. Military

Tools such as online voter registration and well-designed election websites are critical for serving all citizens, especially UOCAVA citizens. But while a website is an important tool, engaging in effective outreach will help citizens learn about the services an election office offers and how overseas citizens can become engaged in the electoral process. State and local election offices can benefit from thinking of citizens as customers and outreach is a way of advertising how the office can help serve them.

There are three easy ways that election offices can engage in outreach. First, they can use social media—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and similar sites—to engage with citizens. Second, they can provide voters with something that they really need and, for UOCAVA voters, information about the issues and candidates on the ballot is especially valuable. Finally, they can use social networks—such as spouses of service members or military contacts—to engage UOCAVA voters in a meaningful way.

Social Media

Social media and mobile websites are especially important in reaching younger citizens. A 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 91 percent of smartphone users under age

30 use their devices to access social media at least once a week. By promoting their election services on social media, election officials have the opportunity to reach one of the most difficult to access populations—younger voters. Research has shown that political parties are engaging younger Americans on social media in important ways.[17] Election offices can build on the interest that is generated to provide all citizens with the tools to participate in an election.

Effective election outreach requires getting information to voters quickly and easily. One important way to do this is to have election offices build their own web and social media presence that is not attached to other government offices or figures. This allows voters to get the information they need in the fewest clicks possible and without being distracted by other material. For example, Escambia County, Florida, has a Facebook page, EscambiaVotes,[18] and Washington state has a Washington State Elections Facebook page that is separate from the Washington Office of the Secretary of State's Facebook page.[19] Social media is critical for targeting young voters as they use social media more than any other age group.

EscambiaVotes is on both Facebook and Twitter, where it posts military-specific messages concerning voter registration, absentee ballots and election deadlines.[20] Social media can be an effective method of communication with young military voters. EscambiaVotes saw a dramatic increase in engagement on both Facebook and Twitter between 2014 and 2016. In the three months before the 2016 primary election, their social media engagement on Facebook was 72 percent higher than in three months before the 2014 general election. Twitter engagement was more than twice as high for the same period.

Election officials should notify overseas voters when their absentee ballot applications have been processed and when voted ballots have been received and accepted. After overseas voters complete all of the necessary steps to submit their absentee ballots, including registering, receiving a ballot, voting and submitting the ballot, sometimes their votes are still not counted for reasons such as a ballot missing a postmark, a problem with the voter's signature or a missed deadline.[21] UOCAVA voting procedures vary from state to state. Differing ballot submission deadlines and rules for accepting ballots can contribute to confusion about where ballot applications and voted ballots should be sent, whether ballots arrive on time and whether ballots are accepted.[22] Ballot tracking and notification systems can keep UOCAVA voters abreast of the status of their ballot.

It can be a challenge for UOCAVA voters to return their voted ballot successfully.[23] Whether ballots are not received on time or there are technical issues with the way a ballot was filled out, it is crucial for election officials to make sure voters are aware of these issues, so the voter can take steps to correct the problem in future elections. For example, the voter might not have been fully aware of the ballot deadline or might have forgotten to sign their ballot envelope. Notifying the voter about these issues educates them and helps ensure these problems do not recur.

Wisconsin provides an excellent case study of both the difficulties military and overseas voters encounter when requesting an absentee ballot and the solutions that states can offer to these voters. Overseas voters must mail a FPCA to the correct local office to request a ballot.[24] However, these voters often encounter difficulty in knowing where these offices are located. Wisconsin assists overseas voters via the MyVote website, which allows UOCAVA voters to receive ballot applications online and provides personalized mailing instructions that connect each voter to their correct local office.[25] Additionally, MyVote offers a ballot tracking system that is updated with important dates concerning a voter's ballot, such as when the office sent and received the ballot and a special notification if the ballot was canceled.[26]

Several other states and counties offer similar systems. The online ballot tracking system for Escambia County, Florida, includes the option of online ballot delivery, completion, printing and mailing.[27] It also informs overseas voters when their absentee ballot request will expire. In Escambia County, absentee ballot requests last for two general elections, but this time frame varies greatly between states and counties, with some requiring a new absentee application each year. Having a UOCAVA registration last for two general elections is another important recommendation; overseas voters may struggle to remember when they last applied to receive an absentee ballot or when they need to reapply.

Communication between UOCAVA voters and their local election offices about the status of absentee ballot applications and

voted ballots is an important step in assisting UOCAVA voters. The Wisconsin and Escambia County, Florida, ballot tracking systems provide models for other states and localities, as they develop their own ballot-tracking solutions. Key features for these systems include notifying voters when ballot applications are accepted, tracking dates when ballots are sent and received by the election office, and alerting voters of any issues with voted ballots.

Election Information

For people living in the United States, learning about every item on a ballot can be difficult. For UOCAVA citizens, it is especially difficult. Even if a person has strong partisan feelings, he or she

still has to determine for which candidate to vote in nonpartisan races and learn about various referenda, propositions and constitutional amendments (issues) that are on the ballot. Given the length of the ballots in many states, finding all of this information can be time consuming.

Fortunately, voter guides can provide voters with the information they need to make informed voting decisions. In general, voter guides are most helpful for voters as they try to learn about down ballot races—such as judicial candidates or more obscure offices—as well as the issues on the ballot.[28] With the internet, voter guides can easily be posted online, providing the basic information voters need without the cost of mailing a guide to individuals.

In addition, voter guides can educate voters about the voting process. Adopting effective voter guides typically is seen as a key election reform because of the educational value. One study of voter guides in four states found that "each state's voter pamphlet provides the recipient with basic information on registration deadlines, the registration process, and additional voter education materials." Some of the states have a law requiring that its voter pamphlet include an application for an absentee ballot or information on how to receive an absentee ballot. Other states provide specific voting instructions with their voter guide.[29] Some voter guides provide pictures and graphics illustrating the correct way to complete a ballot and the absentee ballot envelope.

Washington state provides an excellent example of an effective and informative online voter guide. It has features such as a simple online list of candidates, various formats of the voter pamphlet (such as printer-friendly and plain text), options to view the site in several different languages and a video voter guide.[30] The Washington state Secretary of State's website also links to separate but similarly formatted voter guides for each of its counties (and vice-versa).[31] This strategy ensures that overseas voters will find consistent election information for their county, regardless of whether they are searching the state or county website.

The California state voter guide presents candidate statements and an analysis of each proposition on the ballot. It also includes brief descriptions of the duties of each office on the ballot.[32]

Vermont provides a combined online voter guide and voter registration system called the Elections Management System.[33] It provides a "one-stop shop" for voters to register, view election and candidate information, and track early and absentee ballots. Integrated systems, like Vermont's, eliminate much of the staff time that is occupied by answering voters' inquiries and creates a single up-to-date source of election and registration information to ease election preparation and execution.

Better communication with overseas voters regarding what will be on their ballot can potentially increase voter interest and participation. Overseas voters face many obstacles in finding out the who, what, when, where and how of voting because they are separated from their communities. Informative online voter guides that are easy to find and access will help UOCAVA voters stay informed and prepare to cast their votes. Several states have demonstrated successful practices, such as pro-

viding candidate statements, sample ballots, county-specific guides and translated versions of online voter guides.

Another advantage to providing this information is that voters who do not receive their state ballot can use the state-provided ballot content information to vote the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot. This back-up ballot is available on the FVAP.gov website and voters can submit it in time to ensure it is received by the state's ballot deadline.

Direct Outreach

Over the past 18 years, scholars have been studying how best to communicate with citizens and get them engaged in the political process. Not surprisingly, these studies have included efforts involving candidates and political parties, but many studies have examined how nonpartisan efforts can also boost participation in elections.[34] The results of this research have many implications for how election officials reach out to citizens in the electorate. Key findings in these studies include:

- Face-to-face conversations—especially with someone you know or are acquainted with—is most persuasive in facilitating participation;

- Sending a mailing to citizens before an election encouraging them to vote is most likely to have an impact on unaffiliated registered voters; and

- Reminding citizens that people in their community—their neighbors and friends—participate creates a social encouragement for them to participate as well.

State and local election offices can build on this research as they build voter engagement efforts. One key way to build on these efforts is to work with military spouses, who are uniquely qualified to communicate with military personnel. Likewise, working collaboratively with military base officials also provides a key communications network as well.

Creating Partnerships with Military Spouses

San Diego County, California, is an excellent example of how a county can create meaningful partnerships with the military. The San Diego Registrar of Voters has partnered with the county's Office of Military & Veterans Affairs to connect with military voters by attending job fairs and bringing more spouses of military personnel and veterans into election jobs as seasonal staff. This effort has resulted in an increase in the number of spouses and veterans who work for the registrar.

The benefit of this change has been to create a win-win atmosphere. For the military spouse or veteran, they get to serve their country by assisting with San Diego County's elections. For the county, they get the benefit of election-related information being organically distributed across the military and civilian populations. The county also has confidence that the work of the registrar's office will be done by someone who is dedicated to service. As Michael Vu, San Diego County's registrar of voters, has stated:

"Our office grows over 1,200 percent when we bring on approximately 800 seasonal workers to assist us in completing thousands of tasks for each statewide election. We require astute, hard-working and dedicated individuals to complete these precise tasks and have focused our attention on attending military spouse job fairs to fill these positions. Our military spouses have been invaluable to our election operation and we know it has benefitted our military families in many ways, including having a better understanding of the voting process."[42]

Working with Installations and Voting Assistance Offices

In Okaloosa County, Florida, the local election office, or LEO, partners directly with the installation voter assistance office, or IVA Office, on Eglin Air Force Base and participates in voter registration activities, such as the Absentee Voting Week and Armed Forces Voters Week (FVAP-encouraged events). The LEO also supports on-base activities with fun runs, so they can get their message out in other venues. Because of their involvement at Eglin Air Force Base, the Okaloosa LEO often has opportunities to suggest improvements to the base IVA Office and unit voting assistance officers as well. The many retired veterans in the area help with these activities and serve as poll workers for the county.

FVAP's own research has shown that the spouses of military personnel play a critical role in facilitating voting when they are stationed overseas. Married, active duty military personnel who are stationed overseas are much more likely to vote compared to their unmarried colleagues. Spouses are key sources of information and can keep their partner informed about voting issues. Engaging military spouses in voter outreach and in LEO activities can ensure that information about voting gets widely dispersed to people who most need it. ☑

Overseas Voting Resources

Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act

Enacted in 1986, the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, or UOCAVA, protects the right of service members to vote in federal elections regardless of where they are stationed. This law requires that states and territories allow members of the U.S. Uniformed Services and merchant marine, their family members and U.S. citizens residing outside the United States to register and vote absentee in elections for federal offices.

Among its key provisions, UOCAVA provides for an application called the Federal Post Card Application, or FPCA, that qualified service members and overseas citizens can use to register to vote and request an absentee ballot simultaneously. The law also allows for the use of a "back-up" ballot for federal offices, called the Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot. This ballot may be cast by voters covered by the Act who have made timely application for, but have not received, their regular ballot from their state or territory, subject to certain conditions.[38]

Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act

UOCAVA was expanded significantly in 2009, when Congress passed the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment, or MOVE, Act to provide greater protections for service members, their families and other 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 U.S. Department of Defense for that election.[39]

Help America Vote Act

The Help America Vote Act, or HAVA, of 2002 was passed by the United States Congress to make sweeping reforms to the nation's voting process. HAVA addresses improvements to voting systems and voter access that were identified following the 2000 election.[40] The Help America Vote Act of 2002 created a new federal agency—The U.S. Election Assistance Commission—to serve as a clearinghouse for election administration information; provided funds to states to improve election administration and replace outdated voting systems; and created minimum standards for states to follow in several key areas of election administration.[41]

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