

BEST PRACTICES FOR STATE UOCAVA WEB PAGES

Introduction

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) was enacted by Congress in 1986 and provides members of the Uniformed Services, their eligible family members, and overseas citizens with the legal basis for absentee voting in all federal elections. Many state and local election websites contain a page dedicated to voting as a Service member or overseas citizen. To make these pages as useful as possible to inquiring UOCAVA voters, The Council of State Government's Overseas Voting Initiative (OVI) compiled a list of best practices to ensure the clarity and accessibility of overseas voting information.

The best practices listed below are intended for state election websites, however, can also be applied to local election websites. Local election websites must contain information that links to or is based on state law and publically provided information to ensure continuity in how processes are carried out within a state. The 2020 report, *Assessing State UOCAVA Web Pages* from the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), also highlights many of these best practices.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to building a state election UOCAVA web page. The following best practices, complete with examples from current state UOCAVA pages, serve as a guide to creating an accessible, usable and readable web page for UOCAVA voters.

Nine Best Practices for State UOCAVA Web Pages

1. Prioritize search engine optimization.
2. Ensure your states' election webpage can be accessed from abroad, particularly around key election dates and deadlines.
3. Optimize your webpage to be readable and usable on a mobile device.
4. Include step-by-step procedural information for UOCAVA voters, organized by how a voter would go through the absentee voting process.
5. Design the web page for how people view a screen or mobile device.
6. Include a readable paragraph defining a "UOCAVA voter" for your state, including subcategories as necessary.
7. Include a prominent button for voters to track their ballot and registration status.
8. Make content readable for all audiences.
9. Provide maximum accessibility.



Nine Best Practices for State UOCAVA Web Pages

1. Prioritize search engine optimization.

- Develop a priority list of keywords that will attract UOCAVA voters and make information easy to find.
- Assemble a list of key search words that UOCAVA voters may use to look for voting information. Although election officials often refer to military and overseas voters as “UOCAVA voters,” it is unlikely that someone looking for information from abroad knows this term or puts it into a search engine. Examples of general searches for headings and webpages include; “voting from abroad,” “voting from overseas,” “military voting,” “military and absentee voting,” or “military and overseas citizens.”
- Consider putting yourself in the mindset of a UOCAVA voter and Google common keywords to see how long it takes to find your state’s UOCAVA webpage.

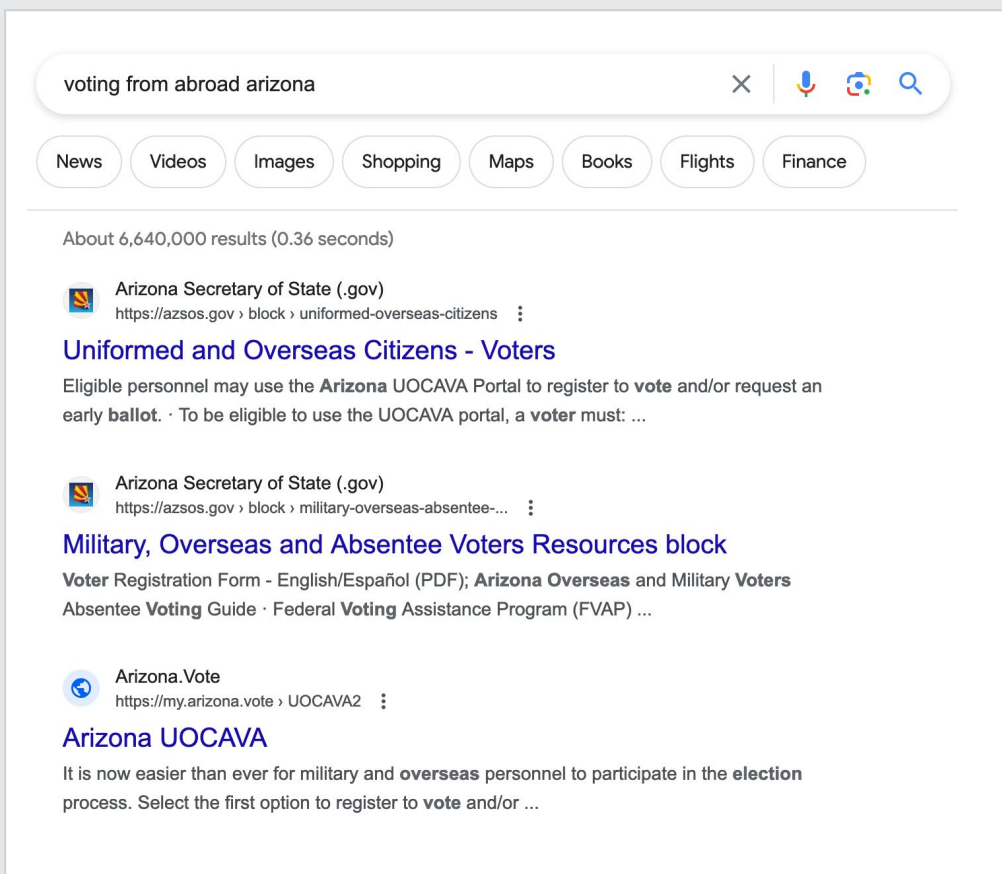


FIGURE 1

Source: Google search “voting from abroad Arizona”

2. Ensure your state's election webpage is visible from abroad, particularly around key election dates.

- Balance security and accessibility in blocking traffic from foreign IPs. Due to security concerns, many IT departments at the state or local level block traffic from certain countries.
- Identify any countries that should not be whitelisted.
- Work with your state, local or departmental IT to ensure that foreign IPs are whitelisted during key election periods like registration deadlines and early voting.

3. Optimize your webpage to be readable on a mobile device.

- Consider where voters may be accessing your website. For UOCAVA voters, some do not have easy access to a computer and will be searching for election information on their mobile devices.

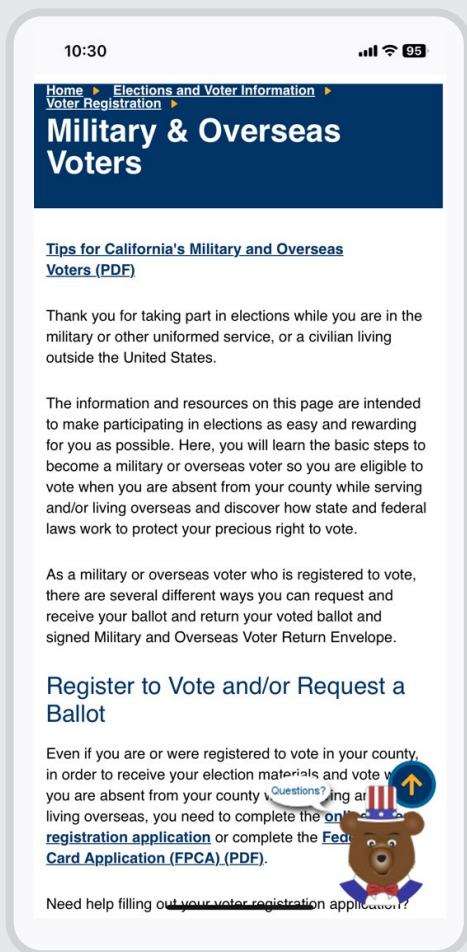


FIGURE 2

Source: <https://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/voter-registration/military-overseas-voters>

4. Include step-by-step procedural information for UOCAVA voters, organized by how a voter would go through the process.

- Consider creating UOCAVA personas and brainstorming the types of questions that will arise for the different personas (e.g. Study abroad student voting for the first time, military personnel deployed on short notice).
- If applicable, link your state's online portal for UOCAVA voters in a clear, easy-to-read way. Some states do not have online portals for UOCAVA voters.

The process is as easy as ABC:

A (Application)

Fill out and file your FPCA (Federal Postcard Application) as soon as possible but no later than the 11th day before Election Day.

B (Ballot)

Receive your ballot or use the FWAB (Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot).

C (Casting and Counting)

Cast your vote by returning your marked ballot by Election Day, or the 5th day after if voting from overseas.

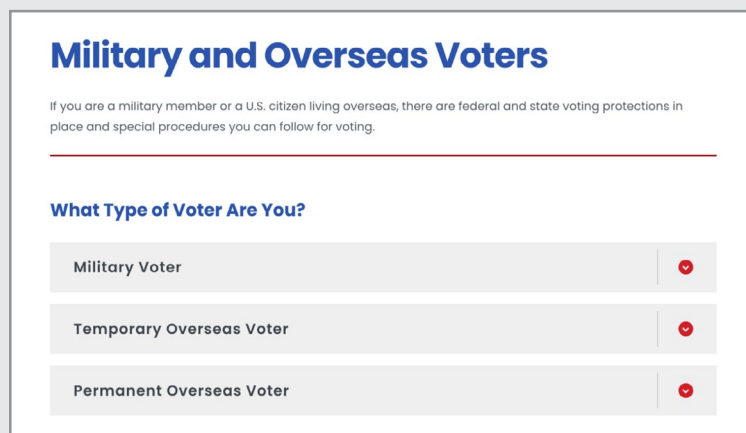
[TRACK THE PROGRESS OF YOUR FPCA AND BALLOT](#)

FIGURE 3

Source: <https://www.votetexas.gov/voting-by-mail/military-and-overseas-voters.html>

5. Design the web page for how people view a screen or mobile device.

- Use clear headings and visible action links to ensure that information is easy to find.
- Implement decision trees to determine what information is most important to the voter. List the most important information at the top of the page.
- Consider the best design for your web page. There are multiple ways to design your web page. One example is to begin the page with a brief overview of UOCAVA voters and then include drop-down menus for each type of UOCAVA voter. Below the drop-down menus, list the steps to complete the voting process and at the end of the page include an FAQ section.



Military and Overseas Voters

If you are a military member or a U.S. citizen living overseas, there are federal and state voting protections in place and special procedures you can follow for voting.

What Type of Voter Are You?

Military Voter	▼
Temporary Overseas Voter	▼
Permanent Overseas Voter	▼

FIGURE 4

Source: <https://elections.wi.gov/voters/military-and-overseas-voters#4257225834-3567133317>

6. Ensure all state and county websites include a readable paragraph defining a “UOCAVA voter.”

- For all websites: Include links to FVAP resources.
- For county websites: Link to state UOCAVA voting information.
- For state websites: Include a link to contact local election officials.

Who Is Covered by UOCAVA?

Active duty military members, their dependents, and U.S. citizens living abroad may request a mail-in absentee ballot the same way as other registered voters. They may also apply to register and vote through special programs for military and overseas voters.

The [UOCAVA](#) allows certain voters who are active duty military or their families as well as U.S. citizens abroad special rights that provide an expedited means to register and vote by mail-in ballot. Citizens covered by UOCAVA include:

- Members of the active or reserve components of the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, or Coast Guard who are on active duty.
- Members of the Merchant Marine, the commissioned corps of the Public Health Service, or the commissioned corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.
- Members of the National Guard or state militia units on activated status.
- Spouses and dependents of uniformed services members listed above.
- U.S. citizens residing outside the country.

FIGURE 5

Source: <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-mail/military-and-overseas-voting>



7. Include a prominent button for voters to track their ballot.

- Make sure ballot tracking is linked in multiple places on a state election website. The UOCAVA page should always include its own prominently linked ballot tracking button.

Tracking your ballot

Track your ballot online using Missouri's [Military and Overseas Voting Access Portal](#). If you mail, fax or email your ballot, you can confirm that your ballot was received by your local election authority by contacting our office at elections@sos.mo.gov or (866) 868-3245.

FIGURE 6

Source: <https://www.ncsbe.gov/voting/vote-mail/military-and-overseas-voting>

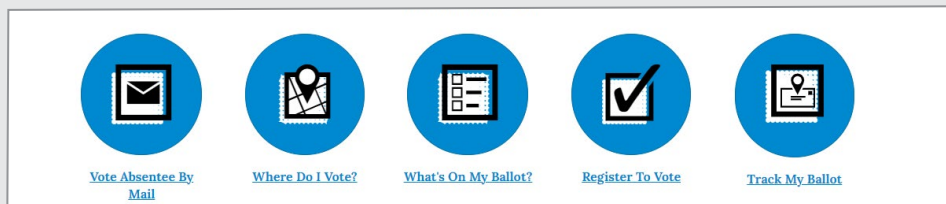


FIGURE 7

Source: <https://myvote.wi.gov/en-us/>

8. Make content readable for all audiences.

- Use common language, condensed sentences and paragraphs.
- Use straightforward, familiar terms and avoid election jargon. Write directly to the voter. [Plainlanguage.gov](#) has guidelines for readable, understandable language.
- Place the most important information at the top of the page. Consider what your audience needs to know about UOCAVA voting in an inverted pyramid style with the least important information at the bottom of the page.
- Use active voice. Write sentences where the subject of the sentence [performs the action](#). For example, say “mail or fax your completed FPCA to your county elections official” and **NOT** “mail or fax is available for you to complete your FPCA and send it to your county elections official.”
- Chunk information and use bulleted lists and tables.
- Remove redundant or unnecessary content.
- Remove pictures from UOCAVA web pages. Pictures make web pages more difficult to download with slow internet speeds.

VOTE FROM MILITARY OR ABROAD

Serving in the military or living abroad? Have an absentee ballot sent to you wherever you are in the world!

Who can apply?

- Military members serving outside their home precinct.
- Citizens living abroad temporarily or indefinitely.
- Spouses and dependents of military members are also eligible.

A spouse, parent, sibling or child age 18 and over can apply on your behalf.

Military members include Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, Merchant Marine, Commissioned corps of the Public Health Service, Commissioned corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and Minnesotans enrolled as students at a U.S. Service Academy.

If you are abroad indefinitely with no plans to return to Minnesota, you can only vote for federal offices.

FIGURE 8

Source: <https://www.sos.state.mn.us/elections-voting/other-ways-to-vote/vote-from-military-or-abroad/>

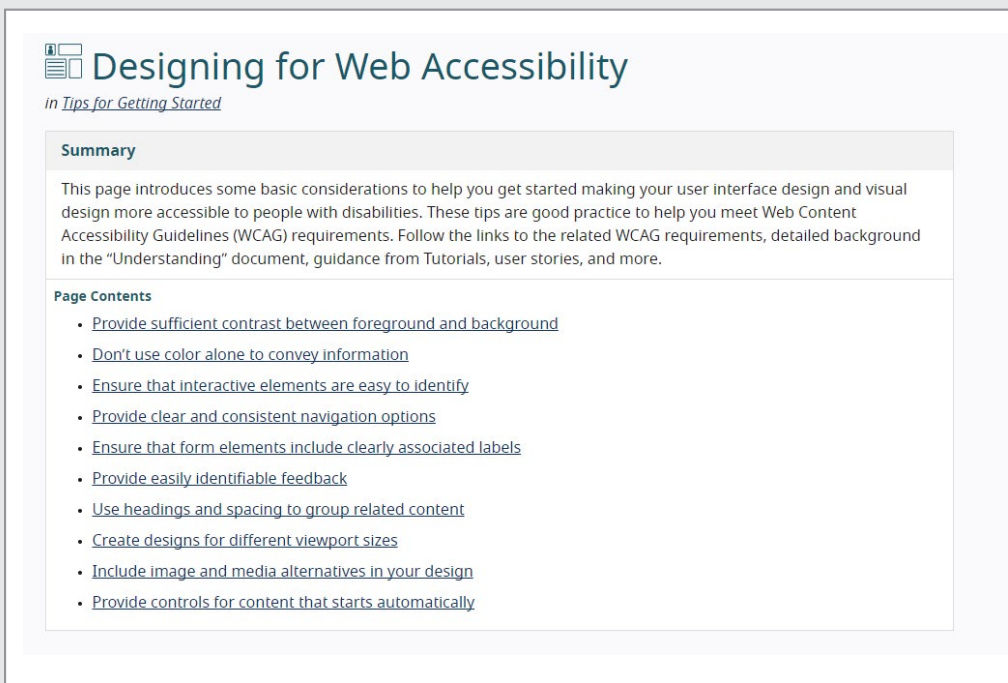
Who is covered?	+
How do I become a UOCAVA voter?	+
How can I check my UOCAVA status? How long will my status last?	+
What is the easiest way to vote as a UOCAVA voter?	+
What is the voter registration deadline?	+
What is the deadline to return my absentee application?	+
How do I get my ballot?	+
How do I return my ballot?	+

FIGURE 9

Source: <https://scvotes.gov/voters/military-overseas-citizens/>

9. Make web pages more accessible.

- Improve visual accessibility but consulting accessibility websites such as [The World Wide Web Consortium \(W3C\)](#). W3C has standards and guidelines on how to make webpages accessible for those with visual impairments.
- Implement automated accessibility tools like [SiteImprove](#) or [Lighthouse](#) by Google. SiteImprove handles accessibility scores and does not require technical expertise, although there is a technical setup. It is a good option for those who do not want to run their own services and testing in-house. Lighthouse requires technical expertise to run.
- Test the page using a screen reader like [JAWS](#) for desktop and [TalkBack](#) or [VoiceOver](#) for mobile.
- Partner with a local group or nonprofit to evaluate the accessibility of the page. [Center for Civic Design](#) works directly with election offices on design challenges at every stage of the election process.



The screenshot shows a webpage titled "Designing for Web Accessibility" with a sub-header "in Tips for Getting Started". It features a "Summary" section and a "Page Contents" section with a list of links to various accessibility topics.

Designing for Web Accessibility

in Tips for Getting Started

Summary

This page introduces some basic considerations to help you get started making your user interface design and visual design more accessible to people with disabilities. These tips are good practice to help you meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) requirements. Follow the links to the related WCAG requirements, detailed background in the "Understanding" document, guidance from Tutorials, user stories, and more.

Page Contents

- [Provide sufficient contrast between foreground and background](#)
- [Don't use color alone to convey information](#)
- [Ensure that interactive elements are easy to identify](#)
- [Provide clear and consistent navigation options](#)
- [Ensure that form elements include clearly associated labels](#)
- [Provide easily identifiable feedback](#)
- [Use headings and spacing to group related content](#)
- [Create designs for different viewport sizes](#)
- [Include image and media alternatives in your design](#)
- [Provide controls for content that starts automatically](#)

FIGURE 10

Source: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/tips/designing/>

Conclusion

We encourage election officials to exchange best practices about effective UOCAVA web pages, including what works, what issues were encountered and how those issues were overcome. For more resources on communication best practices see the [communicating with voters](#) page on FVAP's website with helpful information for updating UOCAVA web pages.

About the Overseas Voting Initiative

The [OVI](#) is a collaboration between The Council of State Governments ([CSG](#)) and the Federal Voting Assistance Program ([FVAP](#)), focused on improving voting access for Service members, their families and other U.S. citizens residing overseas who may face many challenges when obtaining and casting their ballots in U.S. elections. Service members deployed to remote areas or at sea, students studying abroad or government workers living abroad in difficult-to-access locations must overcome hurdles not faced by most domestic voters to exercise their right to vote. Mail operations and access to the internet can be intermittent or nonexistent in some locations. Access to technology hardware such as printers and fax machines can be equally challenging to find, yet may be critical to successfully cast a ballot.

The OVI Working Group is comprised of practicing local and state election officials. The Working Group has two subgroups to focus on specific areas of election policy and technology centered on improving voting access and outcomes among [UOCAVA voters](#). The OVI has conducted policy research, identified technology solutions, informed state and federal policymakers about overseas voting issues and shared best practices with state and local election officials and other stakeholders.

