



State of the States' Website UOCAVA Support

Since the passage of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act in 2009, states have made significant advances in the support being offered to overseas and military voters. A substantial portion of this increased support has taken the form of online access to the forms, instructions, and assistance that these voters require to complete the voting process. This development has followed the overarching trend toward offering online election services for all voters regardless of their geographic location.

Despite the MOVE Act mandate requiring states to provide a certain level of service to overseas and military voters, significant challenges still remain for Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) voters to successfully complete the voting process. For many of these voters, the first place they turn to for voter support is the Internet, and specifically, to their state's website. It is at this crucial juncture that the voting experience for many overseas citizens and military voters will be made or broken.

As part of our mission to improve access to the ballot for those citizens located abroad, Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) recently investigated the extent to which support for UOCAVA voters has been implemented through each individual state (including the District of Columbia) election website based on MOVE Act requirements. We wanted to explore the extent to which they were providing the necessary online support for UOCAVA voters to register to vote and request an absentee ballot, and importantly where they could improve on the delivery of these vital services.

Our investigation involved surveying each state (including the District of Columbia) election website to track specific metrics, which included form access, homepage visibility, and the availability of UOCAVA voter assistance. Our initial research period took place during the month of August 2013, and was renewed in October 2013.

In addition to checking for basic MOVE Act compliance, extra variables were measured, which contribute to ease of use and accessibility. These included the use of undefined electoral jargon, which could confuse users and deter them from voting, as well as measuring "extra assistance", which could help voters navigate the sometimes complex voting process. While no jurisdiction is identical to another in terms of exact support offered, we were able to pinpoint significant areas where they tended to perform well and others where they were not performing adequately.

The following presents a summary of our results:

- 26 jurisdictions (50.9%) offer a direct link to military and overseas voter services on their voting/elections homepage
- The average number of "clicks" required to navigate from the Elections Division homepage to the military and overseas voter-specific section of the state's website was 1.59
- 10 states had at least one instance of using undefined or unexplained election "jargon", such as UOCAVA, FPCA, FWAB, or FVAP

- Rather than offering their own state-specific instructions, 20 states (39.2%) redirect military and overseas voters to the FVAP for instructions on how to vote from abroad
- 15 states (29.4%) have no on-site option for UOCAVA “voter registration” on the state website (they either redirect the user to FVAP or provide no assistance)
- 13 states (25.5%) have no on-site option for “absentee ballot request” on their state website (they either redirect the user to the FVAP or provide no assistance)
- 35 states (68.6%) have no on-site option for use of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (FWAB) (they either redirect to the user to the FVAP or provide no assistance)
- 19 states (38%) provide no extra assistance to military and overseas voters, such as a specific e-mail address, an interactive help desk, or frequently asked questions (FAQ) section.

As expected, the study indicates there remains substantial room for improvement in the administration of military and overseas voter support. Very few states, namely limited to the OVF-Hosted Site Solutions states, offered an entirely comprehensive UOCAVA voter experience with a “total package” of clear, accessible, and easy-to-use instructions, or the availability of registration and ballot request forms, or support for the voter. However, some states typically excelled in at least one area of administering UOCAVA support. No single state mirrored the exact result of another.

Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (FWAB) support was the most problematic area. Across all metrics, states performed the worst in this area. Only 16 states (31.3%) had the FWAB available in a blank form or through an automated wizard, although these are inexpensive and widely available solutions.

Of the 35 states that neglected to provide this level of support, only 15 of those redirected to the FVAP for FWAB support. The remaining 20 states (39.2%) failed to mention or attempt to provide any FWAB support. No state offered an automated FWAB wizard other than the OVF Hosted Site Solution states (Alabama, Minnesota, Kentucky, New York, Vermont, in addition to Bernalillo County, New Mexico, and Okaloosa County, Florida).

In contrast, states performed admirably in ensuring that overseas and military voters were able to both register and request an absentee ballot. Of the 15 states that did not provide a way for UOCAVA voters to register to vote directly from their website, only one did not redirect the voter to the FVAP for this purpose.

Similarly, of the 13 state that did not provide a way for UOCAVA voters to request an absentee ballot directly from their website, only one did not redirect the voter to the FVAP for this purpose (this was the same state that did not do so for registration). Most states were also successful in presenting UOCAVA information upfront on their elections or voting web pages, with a relatively “shallow” depth of 1.6 clicks for a voter to navigate from the homepage to the UOCAVA-specific page.

Despite mixed results, we found much to be optimistic about. Many states have created their own online tools to supplement the voter registration request or absentee ballot request process. In addition to the six OVF Hosted Site Solution states, three other states have developed their own proprietary online tools for either UOCAVA voter registration or absentee ballot request. We took note of the direct links for UOCAVA voters made available on the majority of state election homepages.

Although the election community is paying increased attention to UOCAVA, there is still a great deal to be done to ensure that voting is a more simple process for this demographic. Specifically, through adoption of new software solutions to automate and assist in as much as the process as possible, states can substantially lower the access barrier to voting for eligible voters within their state. We encourage more states to consider these solutions in the future to further enfranchise the UOCAVA voting population of their states.

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