



U.S. Vote Foundation 2018 Post-Election Survey

Introduction

The 2018 Election Day Voter Experience Survey conducted by U.S. Vote Foundation (US Vote) together with its Overseas Vote initiative from November 6-12, 2018, provides insight into 5,100 American voters' experiences of casting a ballot (or not) through five different voting methods, both domestic and overseas; key points are presented here.

217,411 survey invitations were sent to voters on the US Vote and Overseas Vote mailing lists on November 6, 2018 and were further promoted through social media and partner mailing lists including those of American Citizens Abroad and Democrats Abroad. No reminders were sent. Altogether, 5,100 responses were collected before the survey was closed on November 12, 2018.

Of the 5,100 respondents, 88% reported having voted in the 2018 midterm elections, while 12% said they did not vote. Of those who reported having cast a ballot:

- 2,261(58%) identified as overseas absentee (vote-by-mail) voters;
- 984 (23%) as polling place voters;
- 689 (16%) as domestic absentee (vote-by-mail) voters;
- 386 (9%) as early voters;
- and 638 as unable to vote.

The remaining voters either cast a military absentee ballot, a provisional ballot, or took part in Election Day registration and voting.

Respondents' ages were 18-29 years old (10%); 30-45 years old (20%); 46-65 years old (43%) and over 65 years old (27%). Over half of the overseas respondents were in six countries; the highest percentages of respondents were voters based in Germany (11%); Israel (10%); France (9%); UK and Canada (each 8%); and Australia (7%).

Overall, great progress has been made in recent years. Nonetheless, challenges do remain. While technology has certainly facilitated voting, both at home and abroad, at the same time, technology has created new challenges for voters.

Overseas Voters

The vast majority of respondents were satisfied with their voting experience, but several key challenges did emerge.

Ten years ago, research reports on overseas voting identified the key challenge as being not enough time to cast a ballot from overseas. This 2018 post-Election survey clearly demonstrates that this is no longer a concern – thanks in large part to the 2009 MOVE Act. In this survey on the 2018 election, voters overwhelmingly (nearly 99%) report that they received their ballots in time to vote. Nearly 60% of overseas voter respondents noted that they received their ballot via online methods.

However, other challenges emerged: with the increased emphasis upon electronic registration and ballot delivery, overseas voters are more often going to their states' Secretary of State websites to obtain information, access voter services or download their ballots. In a significant number of states (Pennsylvania (most often reported), California, Connecticut, Florida, Hawaii, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, New Mexico, New York, South Dakota, Texas and Vermont), overseas voters were blocked from accessing their own Secretary of State's website. There was an explanation: Secretary of State offices – intending to block hacking and other “bad actors” – block users with foreign IP addresses, thereby blocking legitimate US citizen voters. The challenge remains of how to block “bad actors”, while enabling US citizen voters to request their overseas absentee ballots.

This concern was also reflected in responses to an open-ended question about any difficulties experienced when requesting an overseas absentee ballot. A key phrase kept appearing, namely “voter suppression”. Respondents were reflecting, sometimes with quite pointed language, as to whether the complicated request instructions, the need to re-register, and request to re-register, the cost, and the lack of aid and understanding from local election officials might actually be a way to suppress overseas voter participation.

Even so, 84% of the respondents reported having no difficulty in requesting their absentee ballots, and a full 99.6% indicated that if overseas in the future, they would vote again with this method.

There has been an increasing reliance upon online methods for ballot request, with 60% of overseas voters receiving their blank ballots through the various online methods. However, postal or Express mail remains the most common method of voted ballot return (73%) compared to electronic means (23%).

For those receiving a blank ballot electronically, and returning the voted ballot by post, a new set of concerns emerges: the ballots need to be printed. Nearly 200 comments reflected respondents' difficulty printing them out and sending them – largely due to inconsistent paper and envelope sizes. This is not a new problem. It has been reported in previous post-election survey reports of U.S. Vote Foundation, but has not yet been adequately addressed by the states.

US election offices must do more to support overseas voters with questions about printing and postal issues created by different international paper and envelope paper norms and sizes (European standard A4 paper, for instance, is 8.27 x 11.69 inches, rather than 8.5 x 11 inches).

A further concern also related to ballot return: Nearly half of the 1081 comments reflected voters' desire to have confirmation that their ballot had been received, and to send it online, as many worried that their votes were not counted.

This concern may underlie another key point that was mentioned by 35% of respondents (both overseas and domestic absentee voters) in a question on recommendations. Over one-third suggested a completely online voting system, which would, presumably, address both the desire for ease of voting, as well as the concern about having ballot receipt confirmed.

Voters see online solutions as a quick fix and do not realize that online voting is unproven and insecure. US Vote cannot recommend online voting in any situation as a secure option. While online solutions have made life easier in many areas of our lives *including* in most aspects of the voting process, its use for voted ballot return cannot guarantee an honest election outcome. Indeed, this is one key conclusion which has emerged: there needs to be a broader awareness that, with every change in the voting process, even if it has the intention of facilitating voting, new issues emerge and must be addressed. For instance, it appears that some voters were confused by the "online ballot" option, and thought that it referred to both receipt of blank ballot and online return of ballot. This is the case (email return) only in some states. It may be that there are other mail-based options which may be simpler still, perhaps involving pre-printed return envelope templates, or other methods.

US Vote can, however, recommend the continued progress in online voter services, early voting and vote-by-mail options, as well as the many basic improvements to polling place voting suggested by voters who commented in this survey.

This selection of comments from overseas voters gives an impression of the key points which emerged:

"It is incredibly difficult to decipher the instructions for filling out and returning your ballot. There are 20 pages of unnecessary information, such as printed PDFs of envelopes. The instructions then proceed to tell you NOT to tape or staple those pages onto your own envelope. I ask myself, what are they for in the first place. I [found] the instructions generally confusing, because they repeated themselves often, and also inconsistently."

"... my ballot arrived in time to vote and return it, but in fact I have no way to know that it was received. The paper-based ballot with a special envelope is a farce and provides no security, assurance, or proof of provenance. As I voter I should be informed when my vote is recorded."

"Simplify the process to register to vote from overseas (or any not-in-person vote). Also, it shouldn't require a month to process registrations. It ought to be possible for any US citizen to register online to vote electronically within days of an upcoming election."

"Once the ballot is printed, the process although explained in detail is pretty complicated, folding and pasting the paper around another envelope, etc. And the pre-paid postage is only valid in the US which seems confusing/stupid since it's an overseas ballot. It should be clearly state postage must be added if mailed from abroad."

“Everything went smoothly. Several steps involved, but I don’t see a way to lessen the steps. The several ways to receive my ballot and vote was a little daunting, but easier than my previous overseas voting experience. Looking forward to 2020!”

Polling Place Voters

Nearly one-quarter of respondents (984, or 23%) identified themselves as “polling place voters” with 6% of these voting for the first time. A remarkable 98% reported no trouble locating their polling place, and 78% of the polling place cohort described the wait time at the polling place as “what I expected.” Respondents aged 30-45 were the most unsatisfied with their wait times, with 31% saying that it was not what they expected.

While 46% did not wait, 28% waited less than 10 minutes, 16% waited 10-30 minutes, 6% between 30 and 60 minutes, and 2% over 1 hour. Less than 1% had other wait time experiences. Note that these wait times are the overall average reported across all states combined.

Even given the high percentage of respondents reporting no issues at their polling places, 15% of the polling place voter cohort offered details on unexpected occurrences at the polling place.

Common comments were in regard to inadequate space, the limited number of machines, unclear directions, lack of privacy and electronic problems. One key point to draw from these quotes is that local election officials (LEOs) would be well-advised to provide more information to voters. Voters may not understand the reasons behind certain procedures, and thus may be unnecessarily frustrated and have unrealistic expectations, thereby leading to discouraged voters. The scanning of a paper ballot, for instance, assures ballot integrity, which a direct read electronic device does not.

A selection of suggestions from polling place voters sheds light:

“More scanners and fewer election districts in one location. The scanners are more time consuming than the old machines. The older machines were a one step process. Using the scanners involves a two-step process: fill in the ballot at a booth and scanners to scan the ballot. Different locations and lines for both.”

“Providing more space for everyone to be able to vote comfortably and to make it so we don't feel pressured to rush filling out the ballot.”

“More privacy when filling out scantron ballot which I did on [an] electronic machine. Old voting machines gave total privacy. This is easy to solve with curtains and more awareness by those running things. Also, you should have more privacy when inserting scantron ballot in machine because it goes in face up. In my case the machine could have been in a less central part of the room. You should also be given a folder to carry your ballot to the machine. The "secret" ballot is a cornerstone of our democracy.”

“Place to sit for people who cannot stand so long, better ballot designs, backups for scanners that break, better educated and paid poll workers, better pens.”

“Be Prepared!!! Clerks have months and months if not years between elections. Do test runs to ensure all materials, machines, etc. are working.”

“Dependable ballots either paper [or] electronic ... maybe a receipt of our ballot being sent auto emailed or something - Like I am voter number x in my county and x in my state.”

Domestic Absentee/Vote-by-Mail Voters

For the nearly one-fifth of the survey respondents in this 2018 post-Election survey who had voted absentee domestically (689 respondents), 2% indicated that they were first time voters. Nearly half of them (49%) cited convenience as the primary reason for voting absentee, while 14% of respondents live in states which only offer voting by mail. For others, travel reasons (12%), work reasons (11%) and school-related reasons (8%) explained their choice.

While only 62% of the cohort indicated that they had requested their ballot before October; 95% did not have any issues requesting a ballot, and a full 99% stated they received their ballot in time to vote.

Consistent with previous election cycles, voters are continuing to ask for a more transparent and responsive process, requesting confirmation that their ballot request is approved, and that their ballot is received and counted. Similar to the overseas voters, they also suggest that instructions are clarified, and postage to be free of charge.

A selection of comments from domestic absentee/vote-by-mail voters gives more insight:

"This was my first time voting by mail and while the experience was convenient and I did receive my ballot with enough time to vote, I wish there were more confirmation notices that I was properly moving along in the process. After I mailed in my application for the vote-by-mail ballot, it took a little longer than expected to receive the ballot, so I was worried that maybe my application wasn't delivered properly. I would have liked to get an email notification that the application was received, being processed, approved, and that my ballot was being mailed. I would have also liked to get an email notification that my actual ballot was received after I sent it back."

"More useful voter information booklets for inattentive voters. I would assume for the average voters that don't pay attention to the issues on a regular basis, they really aren't very helpful."

"If we really want to ensure that the young generation votes we need to get with the times and have on-line voting. Pen & paper voting is the equivalent of the horse and buggy for the youngest voters."

"It would be great if we could receive a confirmation e-mail or text once our ballot has been received and accounted for."

"Online, using two forms of ID and a secure internet connection? Or absentee voting booths available in a universal manner for voting in-person."

Recommendations

For overseas voters, the 2009 MOVE Act has resolved many of the previous concerns, above all insufficient time to return ballots. The new problems have more to do with the complexity of technology, the fact that there will always be problems with different platforms and technical incompatibilities. There is also the concern of the fundamental insecurity in moving confidential and private information over the Internet, and that some of the methods taken to protect voters actually work against them – such as Secretary of States' offices blocking foreign IP addresses. Similarly, the complexity of online ballot download, printing and sending has overwhelmed more than a few voters and deserves some rethinking.

In fact, our organization would highly recommend that any voter who is requesting their ballot at least 6 weeks in advance of the election and lives in a part of the world where the post functions well, that they choose to receive their ballots by mail versus online. By doing this, they can avoid printing US format ballots and folding envelopes. Too many voters are blocked from voting just because they can't print, or the ballot goes into their spam folder or they can't understand the instructions. Simply put, the technology designed to ease the voting process is getting in the way of some of the voters. We need to encourage voters to carefully consider, what they do online and what they don't do online where it concerns ballots.

The stories, issues and suggestions reflected in this survey echoed those of the 2016 Election Day Survey. Voter comments reflected how election officials and administrators at all levels have invested significant time and resources into advancing the election process and making it easier to navigate. Domestically, voters consistently have no issue with finding their polling places, wait times are low, and people are feeling rewarded by receiving I-Voted stickers. However, looking more deeply, we see there are still voters who experience hurdles and who find the process discouraging. Overseas, there is a growing chorus of complaints about a new set of barriers – technical barriers.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey shows a predominantly positive response from each voter cohort. It is evident that there are still areas for improvement, and, indeed, there is a clear trend building on comments and suggestions from the 2016 general election survey report.

New barriers do seem to have emerged from the online voting services. However, voters and election officials should not be disheartened; instead, the respondents' commitment and enthusiasm for voting and offering solutions, which emerges in the comments above, should be noted and admired. Perseverance in continuing to improve the overall voting process for everybody and make it more inclusive is essential, and should always be a priority for election and government officials. And we at US Vote and Overseas Vote strongly believe that more progress will continue to be achieved.

***Thank you to all the voters who wrote insightful and constructive comments that gave so much texture to this survey project. We are listening.
– U.S. Vote Foundation and Overseas Vote***

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