

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act: Overview and Issues

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Summary

Members of the uniformed services and U.S. citizens who live abroad are eligible to register and vote absentee in federal elections under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA, P.L. 99-410) of 1986. The law was enacted to improve absentee registration and voting for this group of voters and to consolidate existing laws. Since 1942, a number of federal laws have been enacted to assist these voters: the Soldier Voting Act of 1942 (P.L. 77-712, amended in 1944), the Federal Voting Assistance Act of 1955 (P.L. 84-296), the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-203; both the 1955 and 1975 laws were amended in 1978 to improve procedures), and the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986. The law is administered by the Secretary of Defense, who delegates that responsibility to the director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) at the Department of Defense (DOD).

Improvements to UOCAVA were necessary as the result of controversy surrounding ballots received in Florida from uniformed services and overseas voters in the 2000 presidential election. Both the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2002 (P.L. 107-107) and the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-252) included provisions concerning uniformed services and overseas voting. The Ronald W. Reagan Defense Authorization Act for FY2005 (P.L. 108-375) amended UOCAVA as well, and the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for FY2007 (P.L. 109-364) extended a DOD program to assist UOCAVA voters.

In the 111th Congress, a major revision of UOCAVA was completed when President Obama signed the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for FY2010 (P.L. 111-84) on October 28, 2009. It included an amendment (S.Amdt. 1764) that contained the provisions of S. 1415, the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (the MOVE Act).

In July 2014, the Election Assistance Commission issued its Election Administration and Voting Survey report that included data on UOCAVA as well as domestic registration and voting in the 2014 election cycle. The biennial UOCAVA report is mandated by the Help America Vote Act and had previously been issued separately from the general survey report. According to the results, ballots were transmitted to UOCAVA voters by election officials in all 50 states and four of the territories, but more than half of all ballots were sent from California, Florida, New York, and Washington. The rate of ballots returned for counting was slightly lower than in the midterm election of 2010, and substantially lower than in the presidential election of 2012. States counted 94.6% of the ballots that were returned. The Overseas Vote Foundation released the results of its 2014 post-election survey in February 2015. Overall, 74% of those who requested an absentee ballot received it and 23% did not (slightly more than 2% did not know or remember whether a ballot was received).

Two bills introduced in the 114th Congress would amend UOCAVA. These include H.R. 12 which is primarily related to other voting issues; and S. 2814, a version of the FY2017 NDAA bill introduced “by request” but that did not advance. In addition, a provision in the House-passed NDAA bill (H.R. 4909) would continue some UOCAVA reporting requirements, despite terminating some unrelated reports. In the 113th Congress, the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration held a hearing on S. 1728 on January 29, 2014, and reported the bill with an amendment in the nature of a substitute on April 10, 2014. It would have required states to report statistics on the number of absentee ballots sent to UOCAVA voters before the election, established online voter registration and updating for uniformed services voters, and made an absentee ballot request valid for the entire two-year federal election cycle. The legislation did not advance.

Contents

Historical Overview	1
Summary of the Current Law	2
Provisions of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act.....	4
MOVE Act Implementation	6
Department of Justice Enforcement	7
The Federal Voting Assistance Program.....	9
FVAP Programs Since 2000 to Promote Voting Participation	9
Voting Over the Internet (VOI).....	9
Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment (SERVE).....	10
Interim Voting Assistance System and Integrated Voting Alternative Site (IVAS).....	11
Electronic Absentee Systems for Elections (EASE).....	12
Legislation	12
114 th Congress	12
113 th Congress	13
112 th Congress	14
111 th Congress.....	15
110 th Congress	16
Reports on UOCAVA Voting and Effectiveness, 2006-2014.....	17
2014 Election	17
2012 Election	18
2010 Election	19
2008 Election	21
2006 Election	22
Concluding Observations	22

Contacts

Author Information.....	22
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Historical Overview¹

Federal efforts to assist members of the Armed Forces date to 1864, when President Abraham Lincoln issued an order to allow members of the military to return home to cast a ballot if they could not vote absentee according to the laws of their respective states.² Eighteen states, all in the North, permitted soldiers to vote absentee by establishing remote voting at military encampments where units were usually organized by state. Some other states permitted an absent military voter to designate a proxy, who would cast a ballot, as directed, on the voter's behalf.³

Little progress occurred concerning absentee voting by members of the military in the following decades, despite an expansion of state absentee voting laws. Such laws generally extended absentee voting rights to those absent from their voting district, but who were permitted to send an absentee ballot by mail from within the state. Even those state laws designed specifically to assist absent military voters either did not apply to overseas soldiers, or were ineffective because of the barriers to delivering and receiving mail in overseas locations. When the issue arose for overseas soldiers in World War I, the War Department announced that "it would not conduct or supervise the taking of the service vote," but pledged cooperation with the states that could establish their own means to do so.⁴ A contradictory statement noted that the "soldier vote could not be taken in France or on other foreign soil in the theater of war without serious interference with military efficiency," and, in the end, "no states were allowed to poll the vote of soldiers on foreign soil."⁵ Likewise, the first federal legislation to assist military voters was introduced in 1918, but was not acted upon. The issue subsided until World War II, when the challenge of how to facilitate military voting—especially by those stationed overseas—emerged once again.

The first federal absentee voting law was the Soldier Voting Act of 1942 (P.L. 77-712) that guaranteed the right to vote in federal elections to members of the Armed Forces who were absent from their places of residence during wartime. The law allowed members of the Armed Forces to vote for presidential electors and candidates for the U.S. Senate and House, whether or not they were previously registered and regardless of poll tax requirements. The law provided for the use of a postage-free, federal post card application to request an absentee ballot; it also instructed secretaries of state to prepare an appropriate number of "official war ballots," which listed federal office candidates, as well as candidates for state and local office if authorized by the state legislature. The law "had almost no impact at all" with respect to assisting Armed Forces voters, or on the outcome of the election itself, because it was enacted on September 16, only weeks before the 1942 November general election.⁶ Only 28,000 of 5 million soldiers voted that year.⁷

¹ Now-retired CRS analyst Kevin J. Coleman authored this report. R. Sam Garrett, CRS Specialist in American National Government, coordinated this update and is available to respond to congressional inquiries. This report will be updated after the 2016 general election.

² R. Michael Alvarez, Thad E. Hall, and Brian F. Roberts, *Military Voting and the Law: Procedural and Technological Solutions to the Ballot Transit Problem*, CALTECH/MIT Voting Technology Project, VTP Working Paper #53, Pasadena, CA and Cambridge, MA, March 2007, pp. 12-14.

³ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), *The Federal Voting Assistance Program, Eleventh Report*, December 1977, p. 2.

⁴ Boyd A. Martin, "The Service Vote in the Elections of 1944," *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 39, no. 4 (August 1945), p. 722.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *The Federal Voting Assistance Program*, 11th Report (Washington: December 1977), p. 2.

⁷ "Should Soldiers Have the Vote?," *Newsweek*, December, 1943, pp. 54, 59.

Under congressional war powers, the 1942 law *mandated* procedures for the states to permit servicemembers to vote, but the law as amended in 1944 *recommended* that states follow such procedures. Congressional authority to regulate state voting procedures expired once the war ended, because the law noted that its provisions applied “in time of war.”⁸ The law was amended again in 1946 to include technical changes.

In 1951, President Truman asked the American Political Science Association (APSA) to study the military voting problem and make recommendations. APSA completed its study in 1952 and the President endorsed the association’s legislative recommendations, which were sent to Congress. The Federal Voting Assistance Act (P.L. 84-296) was subsequently enacted in 1955; it recommended, but did not guarantee, absentee registration and voting for members of the military, federal employees who lived outside the United States, and members of civilian service organizations affiliated with the Armed Forces. The law was amended in 1968 to include a more general provision for U.S. citizens temporarily residing outside the United States, expanding the number of civilians covered under the law. The Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975 (P.L. 94-203) guaranteed absentee registration and voting rights for citizens outside the United States, whether or not they maintained a U.S. residence or address and whether or not they intended to return.

Summary of the Current Law

The current law, the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (P.L. 99-410), was signed into law by President Reagan on August 28, 1986.⁹ It consolidated the provisions of the Federal Voting Assistance Act of 1955 that pertained to military voters and their dependents, and the Overseas Citizens Voting Rights Act of 1975 that pertained to American citizens abroad. The law was amended by the Help America Vote Act (P.L. 107-252) in 2002, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-107), the Defense Authorization Act for FY2005 (P.L. 108-375), the John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for FY2007 (P.L. 109-364), the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2010 (P.L. 111-84), and the FY2015 National Defense Authorization Act (P.L. 113-291). The main provisions of the law require states to do the following:

- Permit uniformed services voters,¹⁰ their spouses and dependents, and overseas voters who no longer maintain a residence in the United States to register absentee (overseas voters are eligible to register absentee in the jurisdiction of their last residence) and to vote by absentee ballot in all elections for federal office (including general, primary, special, and runoff elections).¹¹ The National Defense Authorization Act of 2002 amended UOCAVA to permit a voter to submit a single absentee application in order to receive an absentee ballot for

⁸ P.L. 77-712, §1.

⁹ 42 U.S.C. §1973ff.

¹⁰ §107. The uniformed services include members of the Merchant Marine, Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, the commissioned corps of the Public Health Service, and the commissioned corps of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

¹¹ §107 (1). An absent uniformed services voter is defined as follows: a member of a uniformed service on active duty or a member of the merchant marine who, by reason of such active duty or service in the merchant marine, is absent from the place of residence where the member is otherwise qualified to vote; and a spouse or dependent of a member of a uniformed service or a member of the merchant marine who is absent from his or her place of residence where he or she is otherwise qualified to vote, because of the active duty or service of the member.

each federal election in the state during the year. The Help America Vote Act subsequently amended that section of the law to extend the period covered by a single absentee ballot application to the next two regularly scheduled general elections for federal office. The section was repealed in 2009 under the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2010. The Help America Vote Act also added a new section that prohibits a state from refusing to accept a valid voter registration application on the grounds that it was submitted prior to the first date on which the state processes applications for the year; this section was retained when the law was amended in 2009.¹²

- Accept and process any valid voter registration application from an absent uniformed services voter or overseas voter if the application is received not less than 30 days before the election. The Help America Vote Act amended that section of the law to require a state to provide to a voter the reasons for rejecting a registration application or an absentee ballot request.¹³
- The law recommends that states accept the federal write-in absentee ballot for general elections for federal office (provided the voter is registered, has made a timely request for a state absentee ballot, the absentee ballot has not arrived with sufficient time to return it, and the ballot is submitted from outside the United States or its territories).¹⁴
- The law also stipulates that voting materials be carried “expeditiously and free of postage.”¹⁵ It recommends that states accept the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) from uniformed services voters, their spouses and dependents, and overseas voters, to allow for simultaneous absentee registration and to request an absentee ballot. While all states and territories accept the FPCA, some require that a voter submit the state registration form separately in order to be permanently registered. Other recommendations in the law suggest that states:¹⁶
 - waive registration requirements for military and overseas voters who do not have an opportunity to register because of service or residence;
 - send registration materials, along with an absentee ballot to be returned simultaneously, if the FPCA is not sufficient for absentee registration;
 - expedite the processing of voting materials;
 - permit any required oath to be administered by a commissioned officer in the military or by any official authorized to administer oaths under federal law or the law of the state where the oath is administered;
 - assure mailing absentee ballots to military and overseas voters at the earliest opportunity; and
 - provide for late registration for persons recently separated from the military.

¹² 42 U.S.C. §1973ff-1(1), as amended by §1606 (b) of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2002, by §704 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002, and by §592 of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2010.

¹³ 42 U.S.C. §1973ff-1(2), as amended by §707 of the Help America Vote Act of 2002.

¹⁴ 42 U.S.C. §1973ff-1(3).

¹⁵ The U.S. Postal Service domestic mail manual notes that “To be mailable without prepayment of postage, the balloting materials must be deposited at a U.S. post office, an overseas U.S. military post office, or an American Embassy or American Consulate.” The relevant section of the manual may be found under “Absentee Balloting Materials” at <http://pe.usps.com/text/dmm300/703.htm#wp1140123>.

¹⁶ 42 U.S.C. §1973ff-3.

In addition to the amendments to UOCAVA mentioned above, the Help America Vote Act of 2002 did the following:

- required the Secretary of Defense to establish procedures to provide time and resources for voting action officers to perform voting assistance duties; established procedures to ensure a postmark or proof of mailing date on absentee ballots; required secretaries of the Armed Forces to notify members of the last day for which ballots mailed at the facility can be expected to reach state or local officials in a timely fashion; required that members of the military and their dependents have access to information on registration and voting requirements and deadlines; and required that each person who enlists receives the national voter registration form;
- amended UOCAVA to require each state to designate a single office to provide information to all absent uniformed services voters and overseas voters who wish to register in the state;
- amended UOCAVA to require states to report the number of ballots sent to uniformed services and overseas voters and the number returned and cast in the election; and
- amended UOCAVA to require the Secretary of Defense to ensure that state officials are aware of the requirements of the law and to prescribe a standard oath for voting materials to be used in states that require such an oath.

The Defense Authorization Act for FY2002 also included provisions that (1) required an annual review of the voting assistance program and a report to Congress; (2) guaranteed state residency for military personnel who are absent because of military duty; (3) continued the online voting pilot project begun for the 2000 elections; and (4) permitted the use of DOD facilities as polling places if they had previously been used for that purpose since 1996 or were designated for use by December 2000.

The Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act of Fiscal Year 2005 (P.L. 108-375) amended UOCAVA to permit absent military voters in the United States to use the federal write-in ballot, previously intended for use only by overseas voters. It repealed the requirement to continue the electronic voting demonstration project for the November 2004 election by delaying continuation of the program until the Election Assistance Commission has established appropriate guidelines and certifies that it will assist in carrying out the project. Finally, it required a report from the Secretary of Defense within 60 days of enactment on actions taken to ensure effective functioning of Federal Voting Assistance Program with respect to members of the Armed Forces deployed in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and other contingency operations.

The John Warner National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2007 (P.L. 109-364) extended the Interim Voting Assistance System (IVAS) ballot request program through the end of 2006 and required the Comptroller General to assess DOD programs to facilitate UOCAVA voting, including progress on an Internet-based voting system.

Provisions of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act

The latest revision of UOCAVA, the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (MOVE Act), was signed into law by President Obama on October 28, 2009, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2010 (P.L. 111-84). The Senate had approved the conference

committee report (H.Rept. 111-288) on the defense authorization act (H.R. 2647) on October 22 and the House had done so on October 8. The law's provisions included the following:

- States are required to establish procedures to permit absent uniformed services voters and overseas voters to request voter registration and absentee ballot applications by mail and electronically for all federal elections.
- States are required to establish procedures to transmit, by mail and electronically, blank absentee ballots to absent uniformed services voters and overseas voters for federal elections.
- States are required to transmit a validly requested absentee ballot to an absent uniformed services voter or overseas voter no later than 45 days before an election if the request is received at least 45 days before the election. A state can seek a hardship waiver from the requirement under certain circumstances.
- The presidential designee who administers the law (Secretary of Defense) is required to establish procedures to collect marked general election absentee ballots from absent overseas uniformed services voters for delivery to the appropriate election official.
- The use of the federal write-in absentee ballot for general elections has been broadened to include special, primary, and runoff elections as well.
- A state is prohibited from refusing to accept an otherwise valid voter registration application, absentee ballot application or marked absentee ballot from an absent uniformed services or overseas voter on the basis of notarization requirements or restrictions on paper or envelope type, including size and weight.
- The presidential designee is required to develop online portals of information to inform absent uniformed services voters about voter registration and absentee ballot procedures and make other improvements to the Federal Voting Assistance Program.
- The presidential designee is required to develop standards for states to report on the number of absentee ballots transmitted to and received from absent uniformed services and overseas voters and to develop standards to store such data.
- The act repeals subsections of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA) which required states to process an official post card form as an absentee ballot request for the next two regularly scheduled general elections, if requested by the voter. The act would retain the subsection that prohibits a state from refusing to accept or process an otherwise valid registration or absentee ballot application because it was submitted before the date on which the state accepts such applications from absentee voters who are not members of the armed services.
- The presidential designee is required to report to relevant committees in Congress on the implementation of the program to collect and deliver marked ballots from overseas uniformed services voters and to assess the Voting Assistance Officer program at the Department of Defense.
- The Attorney General is required to submit an annual report to Congress on any civil action brought with respect to UOCAVA during the preceding year.
- The act authorizes requirements payments under the Help America Vote Act to meet the new requirements of the act.

- The presidential designee may establish one or more pilot programs to test new election technology to assist absent uniformed services and overseas voters.

MOVE Act Implementation

Most of the provisions of the MOVE Act were effective as of the November 2, 2010, general election. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL), 24 states enacted legislation to comply with the new law or certain provisions of it in 2010.¹⁷ A pressing issue for states that had late-occurring primaries was the requirement for absentee ballots to be mailed 45 days before a federal election. Hawaii's primary date was September 18, which was 45 days before the general election, and seven other states and the District of Columbia had primaries scheduled for the 14th of September, 49 days before the election (Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin). Preparing and printing general election absentee ballots may take longer than several days for a number of reasons. Delays in tabulating results are not uncommon, and the results must often be certified or otherwise validated before the names of winning candidates can be included on general election ballots. Election contests can cause further delays. States that changed the primary date in order to achieve compliance with the 45-day ballot availability requirement include Minnesota (August 10) and Vermont (August 24). In Hawaii, a bill to move the primary to the second Saturday in August was approved and signed by the governor, but it did not become effective until January 2011.

A state could obtain a waiver from the 45-day ballot availability requirement if (1) the primary date prevents the state from complying, (2) a legal contest results in a delay in generating the absentee ballots or, (3) the state constitution prevents compliance. Twelve jurisdictions applied for a waiver based on the date of the primary, including Alaska (August 24), Colorado (August 10), Delaware, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, the Virgin Islands (September 11), Wisconsin, and Washington (August 17). The Department of Defense issued a press release on August 27 announcing that waiver requests had been approved for five states (Delaware, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington), and not approved for six jurisdictions (Alaska, Colorado, Hawaii, the Virgin Islands, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia).¹⁸ Maryland withdrew its waiver application on August 25, 2010. A few days before the general election, the state was ordered by U.S. District Judge Roger Titus to extend the deadline for receiving marked ballots from November 12 to November 22.¹⁹ Maryland reportedly sent ballots that listed federal candidates only, in order to comply with the 45-day ballot availability deadline in the MOVE Act. A member of the Maryland National Guard sued the state board of elections, alleging that the state's actions denied overseas voters sufficient time to vote for state candidates (i.e., governor).

¹⁷ The following states passed legislation to comply with the MOVE Act: Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Hampshire, New York, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and West Virginia.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, "DOD Announces Military and Overseas Voting Waivers," No. 775-10, August 27, 2010, which is available at <http://www.defense.gov/utility/printitem.aspx?print=http://www.defense.gov/releases/release.aspx?releaseid=13837>.

¹⁹ The Associated Press State & Local Wire, "Judge extends deadline for military ballots," October 30, 2010, which may be found at http://www.abc2news.com/dpp/news/region/anne_arundel_county/_/judge-extends-military-ballot-deadline.

Department of Justice Enforcement

With respect to enforcement, the Department of Justice filed lawsuits against a number of states to ensure that overseas military and civilian voters could fully participate in the November 2 election under the new MOVE Act provisions. The department also drew criticism with respect to its enforcement efforts, as some observers asserted that it had not moved quickly or forcefully enough to ensure that all states would be in compliance for the election.²⁰ In September 2010, the department filed suit against Wisconsin, and it subsequently filed suit the following month against Guam, Illinois, New York, and New Mexico. Wisconsin and the department reached an agreement (at the same time as the lawsuit was filed) under which the state would accept absentee ballots until November 19 and local election officials would send ballots no later than October 1.²¹ The department filed suit against Guam in early October in federal district court in Hagatna, Guam, and also sought emergency relief to extend the deadline for accepting absentee ballots until November 15 and require officials to ensure email delivery of blank ballots.²² The suit went to trial and Guam was ordered by the federal judge to extend the deadline until November 15.²³ In Illinois, various county election officials failed to send ballots by September 18 and also failed to send ballots electronically to voters who had requested that means of delivery; the ballots were instead sent by mail. The department reached an agreement with Illinois—announced on October 22—under which the state would extend the deadline for receiving voted ballots until November 16 (in six counties), extended the date such ballots must be postmarked from November 1 to November 2, and required counties to send ballots electronically to voters who had requested them. The department announced that it had reached an agreement with New Mexico on October 13; the lawsuit had alleged that election officials in six counties had violated federal law when they failed to send absentee ballots to military and overseas voters by September 18. The agreement extended the deadline for accepting ballots that were requested by September 18 from November 2 to November 6.²⁴ New York had received a waiver on August 27, provided ballots were transmitted by October 1 and accepted for counting until November 15 for ballots postmarked by November 1. Thirteen counties failed to send ballots by October 1 and the department subsequently filed suit against the state, as well as the State Board of Elections. The parties subsequently signed a consent decree that required extending the deadline for receipt of ballots postmarked by November 1 until November 24. The state was also to make efforts to notify voters of these changes and that they could receive ballots electronically through the state's online ballot delivery wizard. A report on the number of ballots sent, returned, and counted must be filed after the election.²⁵

²⁰ FOXNews.com, "DOJ Responds to Accusation of Stalling on MOVE Act for Voters in Military," August 4, 2010, available at <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2010/08/04/doj-responds-accusations-ignoring-move-act/>.

²¹ U.S. Department of Justice press release, *Justice Department Reaches Agreement to Protect Rights of Military and Overseas Voters in Wisconsin*, September 10, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/September/10-crt-1018.html>.

²² U.S. Department of Justice press release, *Justice Department Announces Lawsuit to Protect Rights of Military and Overseas Voters in Guam*, October 6, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/October/10-crt-1122.html>.

²³ *The Seattle Times*, "Feds: 65,000 Overseas Voters Protected Before Vote", October 27, 2010, which may be found at http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/politics/2013270548_apusoverseasvotes.html.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Justice press release, *Justice Department Reaches Agreement to Protect Rights of Military and Overseas Voters in New Mexico*, October 13, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/October/10-crt-1137.html>.

²⁵ The consent decree may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/ny_signed_consent_decree.pdf.

With respect to other states that had difficulty meeting the requirement, Alaska, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Hawaii, Kansas, Mississippi, Nevada, North Dakota, and the Virgin Islands each entered into a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Justice concerning the requirement. Under a consent decree issued by the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Wisconsin, the state had agreed to certify the September 14 primary results by September 27 and ordered local election officials to transmit absentee ballots no later than October 1; the state would accept voted ballots that were executed and sent by November 2 and received by November 19 (Wisconsin's deadline for accepting UOCAVA ballots was 10 days after the general election).²⁶ Alaska expedited its certification of results so that ballots could be prepared by September 18; requests from voters for ballots to be faxed to them would be sent on that day as well.²⁷ Colorado agreed to "take all necessary actions" to ensure that each of its 64 counties transmitted ballots by September 18, to deploy staff from the Secretary of State's office to assist in that endeavor, and to notify the Department of Justice of any failure to do so.²⁸ The District of Columbia agreed to complete certification of the September 14 primary results by September 24, to make ballots available for transmission to UOCAVA voters no later than October 4, and extended the deadline for accepting such ballots by seven days until November 19 (the District's deadline for accepting UOCAVA ballots is 10 days after the election).²⁹ Hawaii agreed to send ballots no later than September 24 (barring election contests), and to use express delivery and return of ballots that had been requested by mail.³⁰ In Kansas, seven counties failed to send ballots by September 18 and the state agreed to extend the deadline for accepting ballots to ensure a 45-day period to vote an absentee ballot. The state would also provide contact information for voters who needed assistance and would file a report on the number of ballots received and counted.³¹ Mississippi reached a similar agreement when 22 of its counties failed to send ballots in time to meet the requirement. Ballot acceptance deadlines were to be extended to November 8, in cases where the ballot request was received by September 18, and the state would notify voters of the extension and provide a post-election report.³² One county in Nevada failed to send ballots to 34 voters who had requested them by September 18, and the state agreed to extend the county deadline for accepting ballots until November 8, provided they were executed and sent by election day.³³ The Virgin Islands had one federal office on the general election ballot, for which there was no primary election. These ballots were to be sent no later than September 18. A second ballot with local candidates was to be sent by October 2, after the primary results have been certified.³⁴

²⁶ The consent decree may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/wi_signed_consent_decree.pdf.

²⁷ The memorandum of agreement for Alaska may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/ak_doj_agreement.pdf.

²⁸ The memorandum of agreement for Colorado may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/co_doj_agreement.pdf.

²⁹ The memorandum of agreement for the District of Columbia may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/dc_doj_agreement.pdf.

³⁰ The memorandum of agreement for Hawaii may be found at http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/hi_doj_agreement.pdf.

³¹ U.S. Department of Justice press release, *Justice Department Reached Agreements to Protect Rights of Military and Overseas Voters From New York, Kansas and Mississippi*, October 15, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/October/10-crt-1158.html>.

³² Ibid.

³³ U.S. Department of Justice press release, *Department Announces Agreement to Protect Rights of Military and Overseas Voters from Nevada*, October 8, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/2010/October/10-crt-1130.html>.

³⁴ The memorandum of agreement for the Virgin Islands may be found at <http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/> (continued...)

A second issue concerned the new requirement for states to establish procedures to allow UOCAVA voters to request registration and absentee ballot applications electronically and by mail, and for states to transmit the materials to the voter in the same manner. It was unclear how many states either did not provide for electronic means of submission or delivery, or did so only under certain circumstances.³⁵ With respect to returning marked ballots, 19 states, American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico permitted voters to return ballots by mail only. Thirty one states and the Virgin Islands permitted voters to return ballots by mail and fax and, in some cases, by email as well.

The Department of Justice enforces UOCAVA and the MOVE Act included a provision that requires the Attorney General to submit an annual report to Congress (by December 31) on any civil action pursued with respect to its enforcement of the law. In its 2010 report, the department outlined its enforcement efforts regarding the MOVE Act and noted that, in April 2010, it had “sent letters to all covered jurisdictions reminding them of the MOVE Act’s requirements and requesting information about their plans for complying with the law.”³⁶

The Federal Voting Assistance Program

The Federal Voting Assistance Act of 1955 called for the President to designate the head of an executive department to be responsible for and coordinate the federal functions described in the law. President Eisenhower designated the Secretary of Defense, who delegated the responsibility to the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, as coordinator of the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP). Under the current law, the director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program administers the FVAP for citizens covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act. This office publishes a print and online version of its *Voting Assistance Guide*, a compilation of state requirements and practices with respect to the federal law.³⁷ The FVAP office also maintains a toll free phone number to provide assistance to voters and to military and federal government personnel who are responsible for implementing the law; the office also maintains a website at <http://www.fvap.gov>. The website includes a fully electronic system for uniformed services and overseas voters to register, request a ballot, and track the ballot for all voting jurisdictions in the country.

FVAP Programs Since 2000 to Promote Voting Participation

Voting Over the Internet (VOI)

In the 2000 presidential general election, some members of the military and citizens living abroad cast their votes via the Internet on November 7. Voters who were covered by the UOCAVA and whose legal residence was one of 14 counties participating in the project in Florida, South

(...continued)

[vi_doj_aggreement.pdf](#).

³⁵ Information on individual state rules can be found in the Federal Voting Assistance Program’s *Voting Assistance Guide*, although changes to procedures in recent months may not be accounted for in the *Guide*, which may be found at <http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/2010vag.pdf>.

³⁶ The report may be found at http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/misc/move_act_report.pdf.

³⁷ Because of possible tax liability incurred in some states based on legal residence, the *Guide* advises members of the military to consult a Judge Advocate General officer or legal counsel before changing residence (to the state or territory where they are stationed, for example); Federal Voting Assistance Program, *Voting Assistance Guide, 2014-2015*, Washington, DC, September 2013, p. 474, <http://www.fvap.gov/uploads/FVAP/States/vag2014.pdf>.

Carolina, Texas, and Utah were eligible to participate. The program, referred to as the Voting Over the Internet (VOI) pilot project, was limited to a total of 350 potential voters who could request and vote an absentee ballot via the Internet. The project was designed to explore the viability of using the Internet to assist UOCAVA voters, most of whom face unique challenges when registering and voting. To request a ballot, the voter would fill out an electronic version of the request form and sign it with a digital certificate. A local election official would then post an electronic version of the ballot to a secure server, where it would be retrieved by the voter. Once the ballot was completed by the voter, it was digitally signed and encrypted and placed on a FVAP server. The completed ballot could only be decrypted by the appropriate local election official, who printed the ballot and counted it with mail-in absentee ballots. A total of 91 persons used the system to register to vote and 84 (representing 21 states and territories, and 11 countries) cast ballots under the program. A report that evaluated the program was issued in June 2001 by FVAP and noted, among other conclusions, that “further development is needed before Internet remote registration and voting can be provided effectively, reliably, and securely on a large scale.”³⁸

Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment (SERVE)

An expanded version of the VOI project was to be used in the 2002 elections according to a provision in the Defense Authorization Act for FY2002 (P.L. 107-107), and it was expected that more states than the four that participated in 2000 would be involved. The provision called for the Secretary of Defense to “carry out a demonstration project under which absent uniformed services voters are permitted to cast ballots in the regularly scheduled general election for federal office for November 2002 through an electronic voting system” called the Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment (SERVE).³⁹ But the law also included a provision under which the Secretary could delay the program until the 2004 general election if the Secretary determined that the demonstration project could “adversely affect the national security of the United States.”⁴⁰ The law was signed by the President on December 28, 2001. Without sufficient time to develop the project before the 2002 election, the Secretary of Defense sent a letter to the Senate and House Armed Services Committees in May 2002 to request approval to implement the project for the 2004 election. In October 2002, staff from a number of congressional committees were briefed on the SERVE program, which was to provide the capability to identify and authenticate voters and local election officials using unique digital signatures. The voters and officials had to register with SERVE in order to be assigned the digital identity, which would allow them to access servers hosted by the FVAP in order to register and vote.⁴¹ The program was expanded from four states that participated in the Voting Over the Internet project in 2000 to seven,⁴² with a target of 100,000 participants.

³⁸ Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Federal Voting Assistance Program, “Voting Over the Internet Pilot Project Assessment Report,” June 2001, p. ES-2.

³⁹ §1604 (a)(1).

⁴⁰ §1604 (a)(2).

⁴¹ A description of the program may be found in a report by Andrew Regenscheid and Nelson Hastings, *A Threat Analysis on UOCAVA Voting Systems*, NISTIR 7551 (National Institute of Standards and Technology, December 2008), pp. 5-6, available at <http://www.nist.gov/itl/vote/upload/uocava-threatanalysis-final.pdf>.

⁴² Arkansas, Florida, Hawaii, North Carolina, South Carolina, Utah, and Washington, as reported in an undated internal document entitled “Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment,” pp. 6-7, available from the Federal Voting Assistance Program at <http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/serve.pdf>.

The FVAP assembled a group in 2003, the Security Peer Review Group (SPRG), to review the SERVE program's security design. Several members of the group released their own, unofficial report in January 2004 that asserted that the program had fundamental security problems that made it vulnerable to "a variety of well-known cyber attacks (insider attacks, denial of service attacks, spoofing, automated vote buying, viral attacks on voter PCs, etc.), any one of which could be catastrophic."⁴³ As a result, the group recommended the following:

Because the danger of successful, large-scale attacks is so great, we reluctantly recommend shutting down the development of SERVE immediately and not attempting anything like it in the future until both the Internet and the world's home computer infrastructure have been fundamentally redesigned, or some other unforeseen security breakthroughs appear.⁴⁴

The Secretary of Defense subsequently suspended the program later in the year, and the defense authorization act for FY2005, enacted on October 28, 2004, instructed the Secretary to wait until the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) issued guidelines for electronic absentee voting before pursuing another Internet voting project.⁴⁵ The EAC has not yet developed guidelines, but issued a report in April 2010 on its objectives and progress to date.⁴⁶ The FY2015 NDAA law repealed the section of the FY2002 NDAA authorizing the VOI demonstration project.⁴⁷

Interim Voting Assistance System and Integrated Voting Alternative Site (IVAS)

DOD launched a new program in September 2004, apparently as a result of having to suspend the SERVE program, which allowed registered UOCAVA voters to request and receive absentee ballots over the Internet. Using the Interim Voting Assistance System (IVAS) website on an FVAP server, a previously registered voter in a state that volunteered to participate would request a ballot and the request would be forwarded to the appropriate election official. If the request was approved, the voter was notified by email to retrieve the absentee ballot using the IVAS secure connection. The voter was required to download the ballot, print and complete it, then return it by mail to the local election official.

Under P.L. 109-234, the Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act for Defense, the Global War on Terror, and Hurricane Recovery, 2006 (enacted on June 15, 2006), the Secretary of Defense was instructed to continue the IVAS program for uniformed services voters, their dependents, and Department of Defense personnel.⁴⁸ The Interim Voting Assistance System was subsequently reconfigured in September 2006, and the new system was called the Integrated

⁴³ Dr. David Jefferson, Dr. Aviel D. Rubin, Dr. Barbara Simons, Dr. David Wagner, "A Security Analysis of the Secure Electronic Registration and Voting Experiment (SERVE)," p. 2, available at <http://servesecurityreport.org/>.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁵ Section 567 of P.L. 108-375, The Ronald W. Reagan National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2005, instructed the Secretary to suspend the electronic voting demonstration project "until the first regularly scheduled general election for Federal office which occurs after the Election Assistance Commission notifies the Secretary that the Commission has established electronic absentee voting guidelines and certifies that it will assist the Secretary in carrying out the project."

⁴⁶ Election Assistance Commission, "Report to Congress on EAC's Efforts to Establish Guidelines for Remote Electronic Absentee Voting Systems," April 26, 2010, which may be found at <http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/eacroadmap.pdf>.

⁴⁷ See 128 Stat. 3395 (P.L. 113-291). The 2002 language appears in Sec. 1604 of P.L. 107-107.

⁴⁸ Section 1212 (b)(1) said, "The Interim Voting Assistance System (IVAS) Ballot Request Program shall be continued with respect to all absent uniformed services voters, Department of Defense personnel, and dependents covered by the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (42 U.S.C. 1973ff et seq.) with the objective to further improve ballot request procedures and voting assistance with respect to such persons."

Voting Alternative Site. It also required a voter to be previously registered and provided two means of requesting and receiving an absentee blank ballot: by email or through a secure server. Both methods relied on a unique identifier that uniformed services personnel, their family members, and DOD overseas personnel and contractors possessed. To use the email method, a previously registered voter would use the unique identifier to connect via the Internet to a tool on the FVAP website. The voter would complete an electronic version of the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), save it as a PDF file (without an electronic or digital signature), and email the attached file to their local election official for processing. The website included information from the FVAP's *Voting Assistance Guide* which provided information on each state's acceptable procedures for requesting and receiving absentee ballots (email, facsimile, and postal mail) and local election official contact information. If the request was approved by the local official, a blank ballot was sent to the voter by whatever means the state allowed and the voter would complete and return the ballot. The second method required the voter to connect to a secure server using the unique identifier to complete an electronic version of the FPCA. A local election official would connect to the server to process the application and, if approved, post a PDF version of the blank ballot on the server. The voter would again connect to the server to access and print out the ballot. The voter could then complete and return the ballot to the election official. The IVAS system did not provide the means for the voter to return the completed ballot to the election official, but required the voter to send it by whatever means available in the particular voting jurisdiction (facsimile, email, and postal mail).

Electronic Absentee Systems for Elections (EASE)

In May 2011, the Federal Voting Assistance Program announced a grants program to support research and development of electronic voting options for UOCAVA voters.⁴⁹ The program was designed to address the number one failure with respect to counting military and overseas citizen ballots: they were received by local election officials after the deadline for counting absentee ballots. The goal is that electronic innovations developed through the program will reduce the amount of time required by an individual to register to vote, send a ballot request, receive the ballot, and return it for counting. States, counties, cities, and townships are eligible to apply. Initially funded at \$15.5 million, the amount disbursed to grants recipients was \$25.4 million as of June 2012.⁵⁰ The program represents the first time the Department of Defense has offered grant assistance to election officials.

Legislation

114th Congress

Thus far in the 114th Congress, two bills have been introduced that would amend UOCAVA. First, H.R. 12 (a bill primarily related to other voting issues) would guarantee voting residency for family members of absent military personnel, require changes to reports on absentee ballot availability and transmission, revise the 45-day ballot transmission rule, and permit the use of a single absentee ballot application for subsequent elections. Second, two versions of the FY2017 NDAA bill propose UOCAVA amendments. Most substantially, a Senate version of the FY2017

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, Federal Voting Assistance Program, "DoD Announces Grants Program to Ease Voting Process," press release, May 19, 2011.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Federal Voting Assistance Program, "DoD Awards Grants for State & Local Military/Overseas Voting Systems," press release, June 21, 2012.

NDAA bill (S. 2814)⁵¹ introduced “by request” but that has not advanced, would have amended⁵² UOCAVA to, among other things: revise the 45-day ballot transmission rule, permit the use of a single absentee ballot application for subsequent elections, require expedited ballot delivery for late transmission and establish additional enforcement provisions and penalties for state noncompliance, and change some reporting requirements. Finally, although not otherwise substantially related to UOCAVA, the version of the FY2017 NDAA bill passed by the House (H.R. 4909) would continue FVAP reports to Congress first authorized in FY2010. Those reports require annual summaries of FVAP activities and military and overseas citizens registration and voting participation.⁵³

113th Congress

Six bills were introduced that concerned uniformed services and overseas voters. H.R. 12 and S. 123, which were identical, included provisions that would have guaranteed voting residency for family members of absent military personnel, required changes to reports on absentee ballot availability and transmission, revised the 45-day absentee ballot transmission rule, and permitted the use of a single absentee ballot application for subsequent elections. H.R. 1655 would have prohibited a state from certifying general election results until ballots from uniformed services voters had been counted. H.R. 2168 would have required notification of the appropriate election official of a change of address for a servicemember who was deployed on active duty for more than 30 days or who was redeployed, would have repealed the waiver from the 45-day ballot availability deadline, would have required express delivery for a failure to meet the deadline, would have required establishing procedures to process military and overseas ballots in the event of a major disaster, and would have prohibited a state from accepting a voter registration and absentee ballot application from an overseas voter because of early submission.

H.R. 3576 and S. 1728, as introduced (see discussion of amended version below in this section), were identical and

- would have required states to submit a pre-election report 43 days before an election on whether absentee ballots were sent to absent uniformed services voters and overseas voters 46 days before an election;
- would have repealed the waiver from the 45-day ballot availability deadline, would have required express delivery for a failure to meet the deadline;
- would have permitted the use of a single absentee ballot application for subsequent elections;
- would have prohibited a state from accepting a voter registration and absentee ballot application from an overseas voter because of early submission;
- would have applied UOCAVA to the Northern Mariana Islands;
- would have required a biennial report on the performance of the Federal Voting Assistance Program, to be reviewed by the Comptroller General with a report to the oversight committees for election years 2014 through 2020;

⁵¹ See Section XVII of S. 2814.

⁵² This summary does not include some provisions contained in the bill that are unrelated to UOCAVA, such as thresholds required for congressional-delegate elections in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and Guam. The summary also does not include some minor provisions, such as technical corrections to previous UOCAVA amendments.

⁵³ See H.R. 4909; Sec. 1061(i)(15).

- would have required providing active assistance to active duty members of the Armed Forces through an online system to facilitate voter registration, updating the voter registration record, and requesting an absentee ballot;
- would have repealed the voting demonstration project authorized by the National Defense Authorization Act for FY2002; and
- would have extended a guarantee of residency to family members of absent military personnel (see discussion of S. 1728, as amended, immediately below).

The Senate Committee on Rules and Administration held a hearing on S. 1728 on January 29, 2014.⁵⁴ The committee reported the bill on April 10, 2014, with an amendment in the nature of a substitute that retained the provisions discussed above, except for the provision that would have extended a guarantee of residency to family members of absent military personnel, and made the following changes to the bill:

- it would have permitted sending absentee ballots after the deadline by electronic means, if the state allows for it, rather than by express delivery;
- it would have required a state to notify the Attorney General and take all necessary actions, including seeking judicial relief, to ensure absent uniformed services voters and overseas voters were provided a reasonable opportunity to vote if the state missed the ballot transmission deadline because of a natural disaster;
- it would have stipulated that a voter who registered to vote using the post card form would not be removed from the voter list except according to the provisions of the National Voter Registration Act of 1993; and
- it would have changed the effective date from November 2014 to January 1, 2015.

112th Congress

Five bills were introduced in the 112th Congress that would have affected UOCAVA voters. H.R. 702 would have amended UOCAVA to prohibit a state from certifying general election results until absentee ballots collected from uniformed services voters and delivered to election officials, as required by the MOVE Act amendments, had been counted. The bill would have delayed counting until the expiration of the 10-day period which begins on the date of the election or the date provided by state law, whichever is later. H.R. 5799 included provisions that would have guaranteed residency for voting to members of absent military personnel, amended UOCAVA to require express or electronic delivery of absentee ballots to voters if the state misses the 45 day ballot availability deadline, allowed for the use of a single absentee ballot application for all elections through the next general election, and applied UOCAVA to the Northern Mariana Islands. H.R. 5828 addressed a situation that resulted from the MOVE Act repeal of a provision of UOCAVA.⁵⁵ Before the repeal, a voter registration and absentee ballot application from a UOCAVA voter effectively covered all elections for two general election cycles, if the voter so desired. As a result, local election officials were required to mail ballots to the voter for all

⁵⁴ The hearing can be found at http://www.rules.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?p=CommitteeHearings&ContentRecord_id=e07caaca-5d57-4ffc-8257-7bdb82c99a0e&ContentType_id=14f995b9-dfa5-407a-9d35-56cc7152a7ed&Group_id=1983a2a8-4fc3-4062-a50e-7997351c154b.

⁵⁵ Representative Carolyn Maloney, "Rep. Maloney Introduces Bill to Help Eliminate Uncertainty in Absentee Ballot Process for Americans Abroad," press release, May 18, 2012.

primary, primary run-off, and general elections. One consequence was that ballots were mailed to voters—particularly military voters—who were no longer at the address, creating an additional expense to local governments and inflating the number of ballots sent to, but not returned by, UOCAVA voters. H.R. 5828 would have permitted an absentee ballot application to be treated as an application for subsequent elections in the state through the next regular general election.

S. 331 would have ensured that military voters have the right to bring a civil action under the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act to safeguard their right to vote. The National Defense Authorization Act for 2012, S. 1253, included a provision that would have amended UOCAVA to prohibit a state from refusing to process a valid voter registration or absentee ballot application from an overseas voter because it was submitted before the date on which the state begins accepting such applications for the year. This would have extended to civilian overseas voters the same protection currently provided to uniformed services voters by UOCAVA. Congress passed a version that originated in the House, H.R. 1540, which did not include such a provision. S. 3322 would have guaranteed residency for voting to members of absent military personnel, amended UOCAVA to require states to issue pre-election reports about the availability and timely transmission of absentee ballots, repealed the provision that allowed states to seek a waiver from transmission requirements, and established a private right of action with respect to the act.

On February 15, 2011, the Committee on House Administration held a hearing on the effectiveness of the MOVE Act in the 2010 election.⁵⁶

111th Congress

A number of bills that focused on military and overseas voting were introduced in the 111th Congress. The Senate Rules Committee reported S. 1415, the Military and Overseas Citizens Voter Empowerment Act, as amended, on July 15, 2009. The text of the bill was subsequently added as an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2010 (H.R. 2647), which was passed by the Senate on July 23. The House voted in favor of the conference report to the bill (H.Rept. 111-288) on October 8 and the Senate approved it on October 22; President Obama signed the bill on October 28 (P.L. 111-84). It established procedures for the use of email and facsimile transmittal for registration and absentee ballot applications, established procedures for the collection of marked absentee ballots from overseas uniformed services voters for delivery to the appropriate state election officials, and established additional procedures and requirements to improve UOCAVA voting (see the section of this report entitled “Provisions of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act”). The House Administration Committee also reported H.R. 2393, the Military Voting Protection Act, on June 10, 2009. The bill would have required the Secretary of Defense to establish procedures for the collection of marked absentee ballots from overseas uniformed services voters for delivery to the appropriate state election officials; the new law, P.L. 111-84, includes a similar provision. Both the Senate Rules and Administration and House Administration Committees had previously held hearings on UOCAVA voting. The hearings were convened on May 13 in the Senate and May 21 in the House.

Other bills introduced in the 111th Congress included two sponsored by Representative Maloney, H.R. 1659 and H.R. 1739. The first would have amended UOCAVA to require that the presidential designee have experience in election administration that includes oversight of voter registration and absentee ballot distribution, and it would have established an Overseas Voting

⁵⁶ Witness testimony may be found at http://cha.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=363&Itemid=381.

Advisory Board. H.R. 1739 was a more far-reaching proposal that would have amended UOCAVA to make a series of adjustments concerning balloting materials and related election administration procedures in the states, and would have established a grant program for voter outreach. H.R. 2082 would have amended UOCAVA to require states to accept ballots submitted by overseas voters using a provider of express mail service, as long as the ballot was submitted no later than the day before, and received within 10 days after, the election. The bill would also have required the presidential designee to reimburse the voter for the express mail cost. As noted above, H.R. 2393 would have amended UOCAVA to require the presidential designee to collect marked general election ballots from overseas uniformed services voters for delivery to the appropriate election officials before the polls close, using U.S. Postal Service express mail delivery. The bill would also have required a tracking system so the voter could determine whether the ballot was delivered. It was reported by the House Administration Committee on June 10. A companion measure, S. 1026, was introduced in the Senate. Finally, H.R. 2823 would have required states to accept and process any otherwise valid voter registration application without any requirement for notarization and would have permitted electronic submission of the official post card form to register and request an absentee ballot.

110th Congress

Several relevant election reform bills were introduced in the 110th Congress, and two were acted on. On October 1, 2008, the Senate passed S. 3073, which would have required the Secretary of Defense to collect ballots from overseas military voters and ensure their delivery to election officials using express mail services. On the House side, H.R. 6625 was passed on September 17, 2008; it would have allowed state election officials to designate facilities of the Department of Veterans Affairs as voter registration agencies under the National Voter Registration Act (P.L. 103-31, the “motor-voter” law).

Other bills that were not acted on included H.R. 2835, H.R. 4173, H.R. 4237, H.R. 5673, and S. 1487. H.R. 2835 would have extended UOCAVA law’s provisions to cover legislative and gubernatorial elections in American Samoa. H.R. 4173 would have prohibited states from requiring notarization of absentee ballots, broadened the use of the federal write-in ballot, established a grant program to inform overseas citizens about absentee voting, and required that overseas federal employees be informed about UOCAVA and information about the law included in U.S. passports. H.R. 4237 would have prohibited states from refusing to accept registration or ballot applications because they do not meet nonessential requirements, clarified postage markings on balloting materials, and would have amended the law concerning individuals who never lived in the United States, notification of the rejection of registration or ballot applications, and the use of the diplomatic pouch to transmit absentee ballots. H.R. 5673 would have required the Secretary of Defense to collect marked absentee ballots from overseas uniformed services voters and to guarantee their delivery to the appropriate election officials before the polls close. The bill would also have encouraged the use of private providers of air transportation to deliver ballots, which would allow individual voters to track the progress of their voted ballot. S. 1487 would have prohibited states from refusing to accept registration or ballot applications because they do not meet nonessential requirements and would have permitted accepting a federal write-in ballot from an overseas voter if it is submitted from a location in the United States.

Reports on UOCAVA Voting and Effectiveness, 2006-2014

2014 Election

The Overseas Vote Foundation's sixth post-election survey included 4,425 respondents from countries around the world.⁵⁷ There were 37 respondents whose occupation was "active duty military personnel." The survey found that 60.1% of respondents used the Federal Post Card Application to register and request an absentee ballot, while 25.4% did not. Military and overseas voters should submit an FPCA every election cycle to receive an absentee ballot. Among those who tried, but did not complete, submitting an FPCA, most either missed the deadline (29.3%) or had technical difficulties (25.0%). Finally, 74.4% reported that they had received an official ballot, 23.2% said they had not, and 2.4% didn't know or remember whether they had received a ballot.

The Election Assistance Commission released its biennial election report in July 2015.⁵⁸ In previous years, both the EAC and FVAP conducted surveys to gather information from states and local jurisdictions on UOCAVA voting, but the 2014 report was based solely on the survey by the EAC in an effort to be less burdensome to election officials. The EAC survey—the Election Administration and Voting Survey, administered by the agency after each election—was expanded to include an additional 17 questions on UOCAVA voting from the FVAP survey.

States transmitted 420,094 ballots to UOCAVA voters in the 2014 election, of which 51.4% were sent to overseas civilian voters and 46.0% were sent to uniformed services voters.⁵⁹ Ballots were transmitted from all of the states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands. More than half (277,266) of the ballots transmitted were sent from just four states: California, Florida, New York, and Washington.⁶⁰

The number of ballots submitted for counting by UOCAVA voters was 145,509; including Federal Write-in Ballots (FWAB, the fail-safe blank ballot that is used if a requested absentee ballot does not arrive). The rate of return for ballots sent to members of the uniformed services was 34.8% and for overseas civilians, the rate was 31.6%. The overall rate of return, 34.6%, was nearly the same as in the mid-term election of 2010 when 34.7% of transmitted ballots were returned for counting. Election officials in the states and territories counted 94.6% of the ballots returned by UOCAVA voters.⁶¹ Of the 5.4% of returned ballots not counted, nearly half that were rejected were not received in time to be counted (48.9%), while others were not counted because of some "other reason" (32.3%), there was a problem with the voter's signature (14.2%), the ballot lacked a postmark (3.3%), or the reason was not categorized (1.3%).⁶²

⁵⁷ The survey results may be found at <https://www.usvotefoundation.org/2014-election-survey>.

⁵⁸ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *The 2014 EAC Election Administration and Voting Survey Comprehensive Report: A Report to the 114th Congress*, Washington, July 2014, at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Page/2014_EAC_EAVS_Comprehensive_Report_508_Compliant.pdf.

⁵⁹ The status of the remaining ballots was not known.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 178-179.

2012 Election

In July 2012, the Election Assistance Commission issued its biennial report on voting by members of the uniformed services and overseas citizens.⁶³ The states transmitted 876,362 ballots to UOCAVA voters for the 2012 general election, of which 606,425 were returned for counting. The disposition of the 270,000 unreturned ballots is unknown, because states “often lack the ability of resources to track transmitted ballots that are not returned.”⁶⁴ States counted 95.8% of returned ballots,⁶⁵ an improvement over the 93.6% that were counted in the 2008 election.⁶⁶ Most of the ballots that were rejected—40.4%—were returned too late to be counted, while others were rejected because there was a problem with the voter signature, or the ballot lacked a postmark, or for some other reason.

Ballots were transmitted from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, and Puerto Rico, although more than half (456,363) were sent from seven states: California, Florida, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia, and Washington. The report included numerous tables that provided detailed information by state for both uniformed services and overseas civilian voters, including statistics on transmitted ballots, ballots submitted for counting, rejected ballots by reason, and the number of counted ballots.

The report was the fifth undertaken by the EAC since it was established in 2003. It noted that “[t]he quality of information regarding UOCAVA ballots continues to improve, and the 2012 survey data yielded a more complete picture of UOCAVA balloting than past surveys. States are generally making significant strides in designing their data management systems to produce the necessary data on UOCAVA voters. Gaps in State tracking of UOCAVA voters remain, however, and continued attention to data collection on UOCAVA voters and their ballots is needed.”⁶⁷

The Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) issued its biennial election report in January 2013.⁶⁸ The report for 2012 was based on post-election surveys that relied on OVF contact lists for UOCAVA voters, local election officials (LEOs), and domestic voters on the mailing list for OVF’s newly launched U.S. Vote Foundation to facilitate absentee voting in the states.

Among its findings the report noted that 34.9% of UOCAVA voters used an electronic method to submit the registration and ballot request form in comparison to 23% in 2010 and 18% in 2008. The MOVE Act of 2009 required that states adopt at least one electronic method to facilitate registration and requesting a ballot. With respect to receiving a ballot, those who sent the form by postal method fared slightly better (85.6% received a ballot) than those who submitted the form electronically (81.3%). Most voters returned the marked ballot by regular mail (63.3%), while 14.9% returned it by electronic means (fax, email, or uploading to an election website). From the perspective of election officials, the leading reasons for rejecting a registration and ballot request was that it arrived after the deadline (27.5%), it lacked a signature or date (19.3%), or it was incomplete (14.5%). Of the various electronic methods states used to transmit blank ballots, most

⁶³ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act: Survey Findings*, Washington, July 2013, at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Documents/508compliant_Main_91_p.pdf.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁶⁶ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting*, Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act: Survey Findings, Washington, November 2009, p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁸ Overseas Vote Foundation, “OVF and US Vote 2012 Post-Election Survey Report,” at https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/files/OVF_ElectionReport_2013_web.pdf.

were sent as a PDF attachment by email (90.5%). The use of electronic methods for transmission also introduced new problems, however. Among the problems encountered when using electronic means of transmission, LEOs reported that 53.4% of voters who had problems said they did not receive the ballot and 31.9% were unable to open the PDF files.

2010 Election

The Inspector General of the Department of Defense issued a report on August 31, 2012, that assessed implementation of the MOVE Act by the Federal Voting Assistance Program.⁶⁹ To determine whether UOCAVA voting assistance programs have been effective, the report assessed the most recent FVAP report to Congress in 2010 (discussed in detail below) and whether the MOVE Act requirement to establish voting assistance offices on all military installations was accomplished. FVAP's survey on military voting in 2010 was based on a 15% response rate, which the report noted should be improved.

The main focus of the report was the MOVE Act imperative to establish a voting assistance office at every military installation worldwide, except for those in a warzone. Based on an attempt to contact the 224 installation voting assistance offices (IVAOs) listed on the FVAP website, the report authors noted that "about half the time, we were unable to contact the IVAOs the website identified."⁷⁰ The report concluded that not all IVAOs had been established as required because no additional funding was provided for the initiative, estimated to cost in excess of \$15 million-\$20 million a year. As a solution, the report recommended that FVAP and the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness draft a legislative proposal to request relief from the MOVE Act requirement and to permit the Secretaries of the Military Departments to use their discretion in designating the IVAOs, with "the intent that the Services optimize voting assistance to military personnel and other overseas citizens."⁷¹

The Military Voter Protection Project (MVPP) issued a report in August 2012 that also discussed incomplete implementation of MOVE Act provisions and cited, as a consequence, the low number of absentee ballot requests from military voters in selected states.⁷² According to the report, the MOVE Act should have increased a voter's opportunity to request an absentee ballot, but "the 2012 pre-election data shows a remarkable decrease in such requests from military voters, especially when that data is compared to data from 2008."⁷³ The report notes that the number of absentee ballot requests will increase in the lead-up to the election, but the number needed to reach 2008 levels is "staggering."

On October 11, 2011, the Election Assistance Commission issued its fourth report to Congress on the number of ballots sent to and received by those persons covered by the UOCAVA.⁷⁴ The

⁶⁹ Inspector General U.S. Department of Defense, *Assessment of the Federal Voting Assistance Program Office Implementation of the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act*, Report No. DODIG-2012-123, August 31, 2012, at <http://www.dodig.mil/SPO/Reports/DODIG-2012-123.pdf>.

⁷⁰ U.S. Department of Defense, Federal Voting Assistance Program, "2010 Post Election Survey Report to Congress," September, 2011, p. 12, at <http://www.fvap.gov/resources/media/2010report.pdf>.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. ii.

⁷² Military Voter Protection Project, "Military Voting Update: A Bleak Picture in 2012," August 21, 2012, at <http://mvppproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Bleak-Picture-for-Military-Voters.pdf>.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act: Survey Observations," October 2011, at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Documents/EAC%202010%20UOCAVA%20Report_FINAL.pdf.

Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) also provides a regular report to Congress and the President on UOCAVA voting; the report that presented information on the 2010 election was issued on October 18, 2011.⁷⁵ It was the first of these reports to cover a nonpresidential general election, as mandated by MOVE Act changes to the UOCAVA in 2009. FVAP's previous 18 reports were issued following a presidential election.⁷⁶

The EAC report noted that states counted 93% of UOCAVA ballots that were submitted, a similar figure to what was reported in 2008. Of these, 49% were from uniformed services voters and 41% were from overseas civilians, with the rest identified as "other" or "non-categorized." States transmitted 611,058 ballots, of which 211,749 were submitted for counting and 197,390 were counted. As stated in the report, "[t]he fate of the approximately 400,000 remaining ballots is difficult to discern; unless ballots are returned as undeliverable or spoiled, which accounted for nearly an additional 47,000 ballots, States often lack the ability or resources to track them."⁷⁷ The most common reason for rejecting a returned ballot was that it was not received by the election official on time. Thirty-two percent of ballots were rejected for this reason. Finally, the report noted a drop in the number of ballots transmitted to UOCAVA voters between 2008 and 2010, from 989,208 to 611,058, which might be expected when presidential and nonpresidential election participation is compared.

The FVAP report was based on post-election surveys of active duty military voters, their spouses, overseas citizens, voting assistance officers in DOD and the Department of State, and local election officials. The FVAP adjusted the survey results for members of the active duty military (ADM) because the ADM is "more male and a much younger population than the overall citizen voting population," and both groups participate at lower rates than other groups in the voting population, which "drives down the voter participation rates of the military, all other things being equal."⁷⁸ The adjusted results "allow for a direct comparison to the general voting population." The report noted that 85% of ADM were registered, in comparison to 65% of the civilian voting age population (CVAP). In terms of voter turnout, 45.5% of ADM voted, as compared to 46% of the CVAP. Data for overseas citizens are difficult to obtain because the number of overseas citizens is unknown and a random sample cannot be obtained. However, according to the responses of local election officials who were surveyed (53% of 7,296 total jurisdictions), 45% of registered overseas citizens voted in the election. Finally, the report noted that ADM voter registration was virtually the same for 2008 and 2010 (both nonpresidential elections), while a 21% increase in the *unadjusted* voter participation rate from 2006 to 2010 "may indicate that the 45-day prior ballot transmission, electronic ballot transmission, and expedited ballot return of overseas military ballot requirements of the MOVE Act have substantially improved the opportunity for active duty military voters to successfully cast a ballot."⁷⁹

The Overseas Vote Foundation issued its report on the 2010 election on February 10, 2011, which found that 18% of UOCAVA voters in the survey reported that they did not receive a requested ballot and another 16.5% reported that they had received the ballot "late."⁸⁰ The report was based

⁷⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, Federal Voting Assistance Program, "2010 Post Election Survey Report to Congress," September, 2011.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁷⁷ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, "Uniformed and Overseas Citizens," p. 9.

⁷⁸ U.S. Department of Defense, "2010 Post Election Survey," p. ii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. vi.

⁸⁰ Overseas Vote Foundation, "Moving Forward: 2010 OVF Post Election UOCAVA Survey Report and Analysis," February 2011, p. 2, at https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/files/OVF_2010_Post_Election_Survey_Report.pdf.

on two separate surveys of 5,257 self-selected UOCAVA voters and 1,555 local election officials.⁸¹ Among its results, the survey found that 18% of voters did not receive a ballot and 16.5% of respondents received their ballot after the middle of October. With respect to the MOVE Act's requirement for electronic transmission of registration and ballot applications and blank ballots, the survey found that 80% of respondents used an electronic means to send an application, and 23% received a blank ballot electronically.⁸²

2008 Election

The Overseas Vote Foundation published a report in February 2009 based on survey responses from approximately 24,000 UOCAVA voters and 1,000 local election officials. The report noted that there is "some evidence of overall progress" with respect to voting under UOCAVA, but that "progress is uneven, and the surveys point to numerous areas ripe for reform."⁸³ For example, one in four respondents did not receive their requested absentee ballot; 8% of these voters used the federal write-in absentee ballot to vote, but 14% did not participate in the election (not all voters are aware that they may use the federal write-in ballot if they have requested a regular state ballot that does not arrive). Furthermore, more than half (52%) of those who tried to vote but failed to do so either received a late ballot or never received one at all.⁸⁴

The Pew Center on the States issued a January 2009 report that examined the variety of state practices that can make casting a ballot difficult for UOCAVA voters and made recommendations for improving the voting process.⁸⁵ Among its findings, the report noted that "25 states and Washington, D.C., need to improve their absentee balloting rules for military voters abroad," and "the other 25 states would better serve these voters by giving them additional time to request and return their ballots as well."⁸⁶ The report recommended eliminating notarization requirements, expanding electronic transmission of election materials, expanding the use of the federal blank ballot if a regular ballot does not arrive in time, and providing for a period of at least 45 days to receive and return a ballot.

In October 2007, the Overseas Vote Foundation first launched its website to assist UOCAVA voters by providing a means to electronically register and request a ballot.⁸⁷ The OVF, a nonpartisan, nongovernmental entity, offered the necessary information to complete the application process for each of the states, including a database of local election officials to whom the applications would be delivered.

⁸¹ The OVF sent an online invitation to complete the survey to 89,322 UOCAVA voters on the OVF mailing list, of which 4,913 responded. The survey was made available to any overseas voter via an open URL and an additional 344 voters completed the survey in this manner. Respondents were from 140 different countries and all states (but none of the territories). The survey of UOCAVA voters was conducted from November 2 to December 31, 2010. The local election officials survey was conducted from November 30, 2010, to January 1, 2011, and was sent to 10,712 officials in the 50 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands; there were 1,555 respondents.

⁸² The Overseas Vote Foundation, "Moving Forward," p. 2.

⁸³ The Overseas Vote Foundation, "2008 OVF Post Election UOCAVA Survey Report and Analysis: A Detailed Look at How Overseas and Military Voters and Election Officials Fared in the 2008 General Election and What To Do About It," February 2009, at https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/files/OVF_2009_PostElectionSurvey_Report.pdf.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ The Pew Center on the States, *No Time to Vote: Challenges Facing America's Overseas Military Voters*, January, 2009, at http://www.pewtrusts.org/uploadedFiles/wwwpewtrustsorg/Reports/Election_reform/NTTV_Report_Web.pdf.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ The OVF website at <https://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/overseas/home.htm>.

2006 Election

Reports on military and overseas voting in the 2006 election highlighted continuing challenges faced by these voters, despite efforts in the previous several years to improve voting rates. The GAO issued an evaluation of federal efforts to facilitate electronic absentee voting in June 2007,⁸⁸ and the EAC reported in September 2007 the results of its survey of military and overseas voters after the 2006 election.⁸⁹ According to the EAC report, 33% of ballots requested by these voters were cast or counted in the election; of those that were not counted, nearly 70% were returned to election officials as undeliverable. GAO estimated that there were 6 million UOCAVA voters, and its report outlined a series of recommendations to DOD (the FVAP) and the EAC for electronic solutions to overcome the obstacles posed by time and distance.

Concluding Observations

The inherent difficulties in ensuring the voting rights of Americans scattered around the world, particularly those on active duty in the Armed Forces during wartime, have resulted in frequent revisions to applicable voting laws. Congress has been especially vigilant in recent years, amending the current law—the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986—multiple times since 2001. It is the only area of election administration law in which legislation has been enacted since passage of the Help America Vote Act of 2002 (P.L. 107-252).

Based on military and overseas citizen voting participation in the 2012 election, as reported by the Election Assistance Commission, further improvements to the law might be considered in the 114th Congress. For example, the states counted 96% of ballots that were returned by uniformed services and overseas voters in that election, yet 31% of the ballots requested by and sent to these voters were not returned to the states for counting.⁹⁰ In contrast, 16% of domestic absentee ballots transmitted were not returned for counting.⁹¹ In the 2014 midterm election, 34.6% of transmitted UOCAVA ballots were not returned to election officials. Such disparities provide an incentive to seek further improvements for UOCAVA voters and Congress has shown an abiding willingness to do so.

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⁸⁸ The GAO report may be found at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d07774.pdf>.

⁸⁹ The EAC report may be found at <http://www.eac.gov/clearinghouse/2006-uniformed-and-overseas-citizens-voting-act-survey-and-conference-materials/>.

⁹⁰ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act, Survey Findings, July 2013*, Washington, DC, July 2013, p. 1, at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Documents/508compliant_Main_91_p.pdf.

⁹¹ U.S. Election Assistance Commission, *2012 Election Administration and Voting Survey: A Summary of Key Findings*, Washington, DC, September 2013, pp. 35-36, at http://www.eac.gov/assets/1/Page/990-050%20EAC%20VoterSurvey_508Compliant.pdf.

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