



E-VOTING

## Ballot box blues continue

- By [William Jackson](#)
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Efforts to help overseas voters cast ballots had little effect in 2008 election

Although local election officials reported increased interest from overseas and military voters for the 2008 elections, 22 percent of those who requested ballots did not receive them, and another 40 percent received ballots too late to be sure they could be returned in time to be counted, a survey said.

Those are among the findings of a post-election [survey](#) of more than 24,000 overseas and military voters conducted by the Overseas Vote Foundation.

Measuring trends in overseas voting is difficult because long-term information is lacking or sketchy, but constancy is one trend that stands out, said Toby Moore, project director at RTI International who is analyzing the data.

"The problems that have been identified are persisting despite efforts to address them," Moore said today at a news conference at which the survey results were released.

This is despite the use of online technology in the last election cycle to provide information and other resources to military voters who are away from home and civilians who live outside the country. About 4.75 million voters used three Overseas Vote Foundation Web sites established to help voters through the maze of state requirements for registration and absentee ballot requests.

State programs to allow the use of e-mail messages and faxes to request absentee ballots in the past election did not seem to help much. Nearly 24 percent of respondents who e-mailed requests did not receive a ballot, and 21 percent of those who faxed requests did not receive one.

"We have just scratched the surface" in helping overseas voters take part in elections, said Alex Yasinsac, dean of the School of Computer and Information Sciences at the University of South Alabama.

Overseas civilians and military personnel and their families are entitled to vote in U.S. elections under the Uniformed Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), but these voters often have been disenfranchised because of delays in receiving and casting absentee ballots by traditional mail for local and federal elections. A recurring theme in voter problems was the length of time it takes for paper documents to pass between voters and election officials by traditional mail.

However, voters also shared blame, said OVF president Susan Dzieduszycka-Suinat. "They don't read." Instructions from many states that faxed or e-mailed registration forms or absentee ballot requests be followed up with signed copies sent by mail often were ignored by voters. Because of this, complicated procedures for absentee voting tend to fail.

A simple way to reduce the problem of mailing time would be to allow electronic delivery of blank ballots to voters. "There is no risk" in

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this, Dzieduszycka-Suinat said, and the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) agrees.

Ballots could be distributed securely by telephone, fax, e-mail and Web-based services using existing technology and safeguards, NIST concluded in a [study](#), titled "A Threat Analysis of UOCAVA Voting Systems," released last year.

"Voter registration and requests for a blank ballot by the UOCAVA voter can be reliably facilitated and expedited by the use of any of the electronic transmission options," the study says. "The associated threats can be mitigated through the use of procedural and technical security controls and do not pose significant risks to the integrity of elections."

However, electronically casting a ballot remains a challenge that current systems probably are not up to handling securely.

"The return of voted ballots poses threats that are more serious and challenging than the threats to delivery of blank ballots and registration and ballot request," the report says. "In particular, election officials must be able to ascertain that an electronically-returned voted ballot has come from a registered voter and that it has not been changed in transit. Because of this and other security-related issues, the threats to the return of voted ballots by e-mail and web are difficult to overcome."

A number of federal Web-based voting pilot programs and experiments have been tried but shelved without significant success. A number of local initiatives, such as the Okaloosa (Fla.) Distance Balloting Project, experimented on a small scale with online voting technology in the 2008 election.

Yasinsac did not advocate any particular technology, but said that a number of cryptographic schemes are being developed to allow secure online voting.

"The tools are there," he said. "The states need the legislation to make it happen."

Electronic voting technology has faced growing resistance in recent years because of concerns about the security of systems being used in many precincts. "It's a flash point," Yasinsac said. "It's an emotional issue." But when compared to the limitations of current absentee voting processes, electronic voting might not be a bad deal. "Voting by mail is subject to denial of service attacks," he said.

The foundation recommended pilot programs to help develop and work the bugs out of online and other electronic voting technology, as well as using lessons learned in three election cycles to update UOCAVA. It also recommended harmonizing state laws on overseas voting to make it easier for voters to register and to request and receive absentee ballots. A Uniform Law Commission has been established by the National Defense Committee to draft model legislation for this effort.

**About the Author**

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