



Defining the Universe:

The Problem of Counting UOCAVA Voters

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Congress passed the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (hereafter UOCAVA) in 1986. This piece of legislation covers overseas and military voters, which it defines as:

1. an absent uniformed services voter who, by reason of active duty or service is absent from the United States on the date of the election involved;
2. a person who resides outside the United States and is qualified to vote in the last place in which the person was domiciled before leaving the United States; or
3. a person who resides outside the United States and (but for such residence) would be qualified to vote in the last place in which the person was domiciled before leaving the United States.

Identifying and counting the number of individuals covered by this definition is not simple. In fact, the most common question in UOCAVA research and reporting, and also the most hotly debated topic, involves determining the number of potential overseas voters. Just how many American voters live abroad?

The easiest number to classify involves the number of military personnel covered by UOCAVA. UOCAVA applies to all military voters who are absent from the jurisdiction of their legal voting residence, including those based in the United States. For example, a military voter registered in Okaloosa, Florida, becomes a UOCAVA voter when he moves on PCS (permanent change of station) to Langley AFB in Virginia or to Ramstein AB in Germany, as long as he wishes to remain registered in Okaloosa County and does not register anywhere else.

In 2006 the Department of Defense reported having 1,371,530 active duty personnel, 280,069 of which were stationed outside of the U.S. A Defense Manpower Data Center (hereafter DMDC) 2006 survey reported that 22% of the military voted overall, which is

approximately 305,000 voters (DMDC 2007: 2). 7% of the total military voted in person. That is approximately 94,000 military voters who voted in person. About 15% of military voters did so by absentee ballot, which indicates about 205,730 military UOCAVA voters. These numbers were collected during a mid-term election year, and could be higher during a presidential election.

Although the numbers involving military personnel are stable and fairly accurate as a data source, the level of civilian Americans living abroad is less specific. The US Census Bureau Census included approximately 580,000 federal employees and dependents (226,363 military personnel, 30,576 civilian employees, and 319,428 dependents of military and civilian employees) in their 2000 apportionments (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). The Department of Defense Personnel and Procurement Statistics reported that 283,589 military personnel and 42,992 civilian employees worked abroad as of December 2008 (Department of Defense 2009).

In July 1999, the Bureau of Consular Affairs estimated that 3,784,693 private American citizens lived overseas. Unfortunately for those who are interested in UOCAVA voters, this figure has not been updated by the State Department since 1999. They have confirmed that there are more current estimates but, because of security concerns, it will not release them publicly. Other estimates that adjust for this 10 year difference put the current number as high as 6.6 million. If we add the military and civilian populations, the total is somewhere between 4.3 and 7 million Americans abroad.

The U.S. Census Bureau documented how difficult it is to measure this population in its 2001 report: “The Census Bureau does not know the number of private Americans living abroad under the other categories. No accurate estimate exists of the total number of Americans living abroad or of the other components of this population.” How do we define an “overseas

American?” They identify several important key methodological concerns in defining and counting overseas Americans, such as: proof of U.S. citizenship, including citizens who intend to return to the United States or only individual people born in the United States.

Survey data and other estimates are left to fill the gap. For example, the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) released new information in 2008. The FVAP’s military personnel data comes from the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS). In order to calculate military dependents, the FVAP multiplied the military service member population by 75%. The overseas civilian number was estimated by taking an overall estimate of the total UOCAVA population (about 6.3 million) and subtracting the number of military personnel and military dependent estimates, leaving approximately 3.725 million overseas civilians. This number was then distributed to each State proportionally, according to that State's share of the national population. The FVAP estimates are summarized below in Table 1.

TABLE 1
OVERSEAS POPULATION BY STATE,
FVAP 2008 ESTIMATES

STATE	UOCAVA ESTIMATE
California	672,686
Texas	669,734
Florida	535,595
New York	358,971
Illinois	259,125
Pennsylvania	252,999
Ohio	224,107
Michigan	204,054
Georgia	172,928
Washington	167,416

Source: Federal Voter Assistance Program.

Michael McDonald, Professor of Public and International Affairs at George Mason University, adjusted the FVAP estimates to create his own measure of UOCAVA voters. He estimates that there are a total of 4,972,217 eligible UOCAVA voters. To arrive at this total, he first takes the number of deployed military personnel as reported by the Department of Defense. He then deflated the civilian numbers by 25%, which he did because this number corresponds to the proportion of minors among the United States resident citizen population. The McDonald estimates refer to the “voting eligible” population only and are more conservative than the FVAP estimates. The top 10 McDonald states are listed below.

TABLE 2
VOTING ELIGIBLE POPULATION BY STATE,
MCDONALD 2008 ESTIMATES

STATE	VOTING ELIGIBLE POPULATION
Texas	549,219
California	486,207
Florida	451,907
New York	263,787
Pennsylvania	203,791
Illinois	200,530
Ohio	174,703
Michigan	163,673
Georgia	141,001
Washington	138,296

Source: McDonald, Michael. 2009. “Unites States Elections Project, Voter Turnout 2008.”
http://elections.gmu.edu/Turnout_2008G.html

According to these estimates, and as we can see in Figure 1 below, overseas voters are not concentrated in one specific region, but are distributed throughout all fifty states. The highest

population comes from Texas, with 549,219 voters, and the lowest from Vermont, with 10,546 voters.

FIGURE 1

2008 OVERSEAS VOTER ELIGIBLE POPULATION BY STATE



In OVF's 2008 Post-Election Survey over 23,000 respondents indicated the state in which they are registered. Survey estimates of population are open to criticism, because the representativeness of the data is unknown. However, if we compare the number of OVF survey respondents to the current population estimates, we do *not* see any noticeable deviation in the percentages. We observe, however, that California, Minnesota and New York appear to be over represented in the sample, whereas Florida, Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee appear to be underrepresented. OVF's top 10 states are listed below in Table 3.

TABLE 3
OVF 2008 SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY STATE

STATE	NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS	PERCENT
California	3377	14%
New York	3016	13%
Texas	2058	9%
Florida	1136	5%
Pennsylvania	979	4%
Illinois	919	4%
Massachusetts	880	4%
New Jersey	878	4%
Ohio	805	3%
Minnesota	785	3%

Source: Smith and Dzieduszycka-Suinat. 2008. *2008 OVF Post Election UOCAVA Survey Report and Analysis*: 15.

As seen below in Figure 2, the regional distribution of OVF survey respondents is similar to the estimates of the voting eligible population.

FIGURE 2
OVF SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY STATE



The estimates discussed above are hindered by an important methodological consideration. When extrapolating the data we assume that the portion of a state's overseas population is similar to its domestic population, as seen in the U.S. census data below, where the top 10 largest states comprise about 54% of the total U.S. population. We likewise apply this assumption to the military population. Until the Census Bureau or the State Department do additional studies, however, we cannot approve or disprove this hypothesis.

TABLE 4
TOTAL STATE POPULATION, 2008

STATE	POPULATION	POPULATION AS A PERCENT OF US TOTAL
California	36,756,666	12.09%
Texas	24,326,974	8.00%
New York	19,490,297	6.41%
Florida	18,328,340	6.03%
Illinois	12,901,563	4.24%
Pennsylvania	12,448,279	4.09%
Ohio	11,485,910	3.78%
Michigan	10,003,422	3.29%
Georgia	9,685,744	3.19%
North Carolina	9,222,414	3.03%

Source: U.S. Census Bureau. 2008. "Annual Estimates of the Resident Population for the United States, Regions, States, and Puerto Rico: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2008." <http://www.census.gov/popest/states/NST-ann-est.html>.

Despite these challenges, we can draw several clear conclusions from this review. First, there is overwhelming evidence that the overseas population is large and continues to grow. Second, we know that the data on the military population is stable and accurate, while civilian voters are more difficult to count. Third, we can observe that the various estimates are based on the same original data source, although apportioned slightly differently, and the McDonald

estimates are slightly lower than the FVAP estimates. We recommend using the McDonald estimates; these estimates are more conservative and reflect the “voting eligible population,” but not the entire universe of Americans abroad.

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