



2016 Election Day Voter Experience Survey Highlights

The 2016 Election Day Voter Experience Survey, conducted by U.S. Vote Foundation (US Vote) together with its Overseas Vote initiative from Nov 8-11, 2016, provides new insights into approximately 12, 000 voters' actual experiences of casting a ballot (or not) through six different voting methods, both domestic and overseas.

Highlights / Key Findings

Among the many new insights, certain findings stood out:

- **Satisfaction and Motivation** – 76% of overall respondents indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the voting process; and in a rating from 1 to 5, with 5 highest, overall voter motivation was 4.6%
- **Online Ballot Delivery Dominates for Overseas Voters** – For the first time ever in a general election, overseas absentee voters in the 2016 election were more likely to receive their blank ballots through an electronic method (72%) than through postal mail
- **Timely Ballot Receipt** – An average of 95% of the domestic and overseas absentee respondents reported receiving their ballot in time to vote
- **Convenience Matters** – 23% of domestic absentee (vote-by-mail) voters and 63% of early voters cited convenience and preference for these voting methods over other reasons
- **Absentee Voting Ease** – 89% of domestic absentee voters and 85% of overseas absentee voters reported “no difficulties” with the voting process
- **The Simple Things** – Voter comments indicated that a cup of coffee and an “I-Voted” sticker can have an oversized impact on their polling place experience; not receiving these simple things disappointed voters
- **Online Voting – really? Really.** – Despite the swirl of media attention on cyber threats, voter system vulnerabilities, ballot integrity and hacking, voters continue to request a move to online voting

Research Objective

The main survey objective was to gain insight into voters' immediate experiences of the voting process during the 2016 General Election held on November 8, 2016. The survey was less a detailed analysis of the voting process, which the foundation achieves through its Post-Election Survey, but more an instant measure of voter motivation, satisfaction levels, and outstanding issues or problems encountered, as well as to take a snapshot of voter sentiment surrounding casting a ballot in the 2016 General Election.

Altogether, the impression of voting for overseas absentee voters is positive: Over 80% requested their ballots prior to October, 72% received their blank ballot electronically (email, fax or download) and 96% indicated receiving their ballot on time.

Postal or Express mail (74%) remains the most common method of voted ballot return compared to electronic means (23%). Despite the fact that 15% of the overseas absentee voter cohort reported having problems requesting their absentee ballot, a full 99% indicated that if overseas in the future, they would vote again with this method.

Similar to the domestic absentee cohort, the majority of overseas voter comments expressed a desire to send the ballot back via email, and a confirmation that their ballot was received.

However, in contrast to domestic absentee voters, there was a strong lack of confidence for overseas voters that they used their ballot correctly and consistent complaints that instructions were unclear. Notably, most of these voters were using electronically transmitted blank ballots.

It is evident from the comments received, that US election offices still do not understand international paper and envelope sizes and norms leaving voters to cope with printing and postal issues created by both electronically received and paper ballots. Lastly, many overseas voters were angered by the price they had to pay in order mail their ballot back.

A selection of comments from overseas absentee voters:

“As nice as it is to receive the documents by email, it's a bit fiddly printing out and then assembling everything correctly in the various envelopes. Because of page size differences, I have to print out and tape the envelope details on, and I'm never 100% if I'm doing it correctly.”

“Better explanation on how to fill in the ballot and envelope, how to check your status online and explanation of which offices can be voted on by non residents.”

“I just felt no sense of certainty that my ballot was received or that my vote counted.”

“Do not request annual re-registration.”

“The actual request was easy, however I had several issues accessing the ballot online AND mailing it back was a costly and HUGE hassle. Overseas voting should have access to email the votes in, fax in OR vote online with a special code.”

“I would like to state that I am very happy it was not a partisan experience. Felt neutral and safe to vote.”

“Stop using oversize envelopes for overseas addresses! Free postage does NOT apply outside the U.S.”

“Have the ballots and [ballot return] envelopes print on A4 paper size.”

“It would be nice to be able to send the overseas absentee ballot back by email instead of by post.”

“Find a way to cover postage fees for those of us returning ballots via post, especially as that's the only option for overseas voters.”

“I'd like the option of voting online.”

Another common request, despite the negative media coverage regarding election hacking, was for online voting. While online voting is far from reality, many of the other suggestions that voters offered were simple, straightforward and easily implementable.

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

“Once you register online - an email confirmation [should be] sent within 24 hours [to indicate] that everything was done correctly or not.”

“Make it clear that you need to be a permanent mail voter and applying to vote by mail for the primary does not carry over to the election. Also, I shouldn't need stamps to vote by mail- it should be free.”

“A confirmation that the registration was received and accepted, with the date until when the ballot should arrive would have been very helpful.”

“Make the entire process digital so you have a tracking or request number from the beginning rather than having to send an email to one place to confirm receipt of request and another place to see if your ballot was received.”

“Have a secure online option.”

“Thought it was great. Loved that the return envelopes were pre-paid and that the “I voted” stickers were also included.”

80% of absentee/vote-by-mail voters indicated that they would likely vote again using the same method while 7% indicated they would consider polling place voting and 4% early voting; 9% were unsure.

Polling Place Voters

1,103 respondents identified themselves as “polling place voters” with 22% also being “first time voters.” A remarkable 98% reported no issues locating their polling place.

68% of the polling place cohort described the wait time at the polling place as “what I expected.” While 37% did not wait, 28% waited less than 10 minutes, 18% waited 10-30 minutes, 10% between 30 and 60 minutes, and 5% over 1 hour. Less than 3% had other wait time experiences. Note that these wait times are the overall average reported across all states combined.

15% of the polling place voter cohort offered details on unexpected occurrences at the polling place. Comments regarding polling place disorganization and lack of adequate space;

broken, malfunctioning or difficult-to-use machines, poor poll worker training, voters’ names not found in the poll book and disappointment over the lack of “I-Voted” stickers were most frequent.

A selection of comments from polling place voters:

“[The] machine would not take my ballot. Had to get a new one. No paper ballots were there.”

“Four women came in saying it was their first time to vote. Everyone in the room applauded.”

“The table I was writing on in the booth broke and my ballot went flying....”

"I was surprised that if I knew my electoral district, I could proceed straight to that table and not wait in line. I was also surprised that simply by having my own pen, I could avoid waiting for a voting booth."

"All of the M-Z names went ahead of everyone else who had been waiting over 30 min. Not fair at all."

"There were no 'I voted' stickers."

"I just didn't know exactly what to do because it was my first time and I really couldn't get the help that I wanted."

"More poll workers and more voting booths. Waiting 2 hours to vote is unacceptable. (As is being told, "we didn't expect so many people.") I WISH that I could have voted by mail, but that was not an option available to me."

78% of polling place respondents indicated that they would likely vote again at the polling place; 9% respectively stated that they would consider early voting or vote-by-mail; with the remaining 4% unsure.

Early Voters

Of the 540 early voters responding, 19.5% were from Texas and 13% from Florida, and 6% from North Carolina, while the remaining were smaller percentages from other states. 16.5% were first time voters. A remarkable 69% cited convenience or preference as their reason for voting early with 21% citing work and 14% citing travel reasons, respectively.

As with the election day polling place voters, 98% of the early voter cohort reported that they easily located their polling place. 68% described the wait as "what I expected" while 32% had the opposite experience. While 41% did not wait, 23% waited less than 10 minutes, 17% waited 10-30 minutes, 8% between 30 and 60 minutes, and 6% over 1 hour. Slightly over 3% had other wait time experiences.

Early voters' comments varied widely. Many weighed in on the need for more parking, longer opening hours, shorter wait times and more locations.

A selection of comments from early voters:

"The room was very noisy and cramped. I understand in order to make the most of the space it will be limited, however, there was a lot of talking and it was distracting."

"Offer longer hours; start earlier than late October."

"Make early voting available for a month prior, every day, not just weekends."

"Have vans go around door to door to capture all the voters."

"I actually thought it was great!!! The workers were very pleasant and I only had two people ahead of me. I was very happy at how easy everything was. Staff once again was very courteous."

"It was a great experience. My only suggestion would be to make the voting hours longer so people could vote after work, not have to run out to vote during work. Maybe keep it open till 6 p.m. like regular voting day."

"Do as they do in Washington (state) - Ballots are mailed out to everyone and must be returned by a deadline. Cuts down on polling places, people working the polling

places, early voting, being turned away, long lines, inconvenience, trying to find polling place, patience, voter's registration card, and problems with voting machines.”

85% of early voters indicated that they would likely vote again using the same method while 6% indicated they would consider absentee/vote-by-mail, just 1.5% would consider polling place voting and 7.3% were unsure.

Did Not Vote

Of the 1,337 (12%) of respondents who reported that they did not vote, only 28% of them were voting for the first time. The largest block of these non-voters was from New York (21%) with California well behind at 12%.

The main reasons cited for not voting were deadlines (34%) a late or non-arriving (43%) ballot. 45% of non-voters indicate that they tried to get help; but by far the most encouraging statistic: 95% of the non-voters reported that they will try again to vote in the future. That the process did not discourage them entirely is a positive indicator.

Other Participating Voters

Although military absentee voters and voters who either cast a provisional ballot or took advantage of Election Day registration and voting did participate in the Election Day Survey, these cohorts were not large enough to provide representative samples.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The stories around this election, as reflected in this survey are certainly not all tales of woe. Election officials and administrators at all levels have invested tremendous effort and resources to advance elections with the judicious application of technology, and it shows. Notice how voters in this survey stated that they had no trouble finding their polling places. This is due to advances in online tools and services now widely available through states, counties and third parties. Such advances are on the way to occurring in other areas, such as voter registration and new technologies to monitor wait times at the polls and they are having an effect.

The insights revealed through this survey lend themselves to many practical recommendations to election policy makers and administrators, including but not limited to the following:

1. The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act of 2009 is showing its intended impact on process modernization. The majority of blank ballot transmission is now electronic and voters are saying their ballots are arriving in time to vote – both vital improvements.

However, putting a blank ballot online is not enough. Along with the positive changes, this process change has ushered in new challenges, which require new technical skills to manage.

For vote-by-mail ballots sent by electronic means, which require printing and posting:

- Usability testing and refinement of absentee ballot design and instructions
 - Plain language instructions; test with actual voters
 - Design for international paper sizes and printing
 - Set up a call-in technical help line or help desk to support voters struggling with download, print and mailing issues
2. Voters are looking for help when they encounter issues with the voting process. Election offices should make their means and methods of assisting voters more evident. No voter question should go unanswered. Help desks, hot lines, and email support all make a difference.
 3. Both overseas and domestic absentee voters are frustrated by the opaque nature of the ballot request and vote-by-mail process. They want to hear back from their election office at every step in the voting process to know they are on track. Has their request been received and approved, has their ballot been sent, received, counted?

The ability for election offices to offer real-time status information for voters will greatly change their sense of satisfaction in the voting process. Even if it is not possible to communicate with voters at each step of the process, even one time will have an effect on the voter experience.

4. The greater election community needs to commit to an ongoing general information campaign for the public as to why online voting (ballot return) is not a safe and secure option. While online solutions have made life easier in many areas of our lives *including* in most aspects of the voting process, its use for voted ballot return can not guarantee an honest election outcome. The risk to the integrity of the election is too high and therefore states are not able to implement this type of technology. These basic facts do not seem widely known and lead to frustration among voters.
5. The simple things of life matter – even in voting, maybe *especially* in voting. Precinct officials who can manage to offer seating for those who tire while standing in line, coffee, or some other refreshment may find the returns are great. “I-Voted” stickers as a token reward for their voting effort were mentioned across the board, along with the voter disappointment when they were not offered. This is not the item to forget!
6. Convenience matters in all that we do, but also with voting. The choice of certain voting methods due to their convenience is vital to recognize. Voters strongly indicate that convenience affects their choices on how to vote. Policy makers should consider convenience an important factor in the evaluation of any voting process change.
7. US Vote strongly encourages election policy makers to consider the successful adoption of online blank ballot delivery for overseas and military absentee voters and consider expanding this as an option for domestic absentee voters.

Despite the hurdles, and areas where progress is still needed and yet to be made, the story here is one of positive incremental progress; and at US Vote and Overseas Vote, we believe, more progress to come.

Additional notes

3,610 of the respondents indicated their interest to participate US Vote's traditional Post-Election Survey that followed. Results of the Post-Election Survey are expected to be available in April 2017.

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P.S. To readers looking for more:

We send a shout-out to voters like this one, who provide comments with precise, well-considered recommendations:

“When I was overseas in Korea, my home of residence was Washington. They sent me a little booklet with a short summary of the major positions of each competing candidate at all levels (which I think each candidate wrote themselves). This was VERY helpful in making an informed decision about voting! But now I am back in the US, living in Tennessee. When I looked for that kind of thing here, I was able to find many sites outlining the positions of presidential candidates, but I couldn't find anything like that booklet for the more local candidates even though I'm usually very good at finding things, especially online. There wasn't anything like that in my ballot mailings, not online, not at the library, nor at the polling place. Not anywhere.

The day of the election, I went to the polling place, thinking there might be something like that. There wasn't. I went to the library next door and searched for 2 hours. Couldn't find anything.

My dad who is a pastor with a Ph.D. told me that he went in and voted, but had almost no idea about the views of the candidates he was voting for. It was mostly guessing by names and party affiliation. It was very hard to know what the candidates stood for unless you go to each candidates' website in each context which is quite tedious. Most voters are simply not going to do that and won't even search for a few hours like I did.

So, having a short 1/2 page to 1 page summary of the positions each candidate holds would be ideal. From reading the founders of America, this is not just something trivial. It is absolutely essential to have informed voters if democracy is to have any chance of functioning well as it should. I highly recommend having each state and county making a summary of the views of each candidate in each context available in an easily located place on government/state/county websites and if possible at polling places on the day of voting as well.”

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