



These are our Numbers:

Civilian Americans Overseas and Voter Turnout

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In the June /July 2010 issue of the OVF Research Newsletter, I examined the concept and measurement of military voter turnout, i.e. the number of individuals who actually vote in a given election. As difficult as measuring military voter turnout is, calculating voter turnout among civilian Americans living abroad is exponentially more complicated. If turnout is defined as the number of votes cast divided by the number of eligible voters (see MacDonald and Popkin 2001), then the denominator in this equation is largely unknown when discussing overseas civilian Americans. How many voting eligible civilian Americans live abroad? To what extent does this population vote? Below, I attempt to fill in the gaps left by these unanswered questions by reviewing population statistics from newly released State Department data as well as foreign governments in order to gain a better picture of the

number of civilian Americans abroad. Second, I calculate national voter turnout rates using data from the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC).

U.S. Census Data

As discussed in the premier issue of the OVF Research Newsletter, there are two primary sources for data on the number of civilian Americans living abroad (Smith 2009). The first is the U.S. Census Bureau. The 2000 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 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.” Because of these difficulties, the Bureau will not include overseas Americans in the 2010 census.

U.S. State Department Data

The second source of data is the U.S. State Department. 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 overseas voters, this figure has not been updated by the State Department since 1999, even though the general number of 5,256,600 was released in 2009. They have confirmed that there are more current estimates but, because of security concerns, it will not release them publicly.

In 2010, the Bureau of Consular Affairs of the U.S. State Department released new data on the number of children born abroad as U.S. citizens during the ten year period of 2000 to 2009. 503,585 consular reports of birth abroad (CRBA) were made and passports issued as a result by U.S. embassies between 2000 and 2009, as seen in Table 1. On a regional basis, more U.S. citizen children were born in Europe than any other region and

accounted for 40 percent of births in 2000. Europe's importance appears to be decreasing and it represented less than 30 percent of total births by 2009. Eastern Asia and the Western Hemisphere had roughly the same number of births in 2009, about 24 percent. While South and Central Asia and Africa have shown the most rapid growth in percentage terms, in numbers of births per year they still account for only a tiny portion of the worldwide total.

Table 1 Births of U.S. Citizen Children Abroad by Region

Region	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2000-2009
Number of Total Births by Region Each Year											2000-2009
Europe	17,957	17,677	17,346	17,592	18,323	19,280	19,076	17,684	18,144	18,131	181,210
Eastern Asia and Pacific	9,304	9,656	9,668	10,338	11,076	11,676	11,771	13,314	13,662	14,787	115,252
Western Hemisphere	10,150	11,189	9,875	10,119	10,752	11,733	11,912	13,062	14,098	14,324	117,214
Near Eastern Asia	60,059	6,362	5,156	5,541	5,834	6,520	7,207	7,073	8,866	10,017	68,635
Africa	708	715	758	830	886	1,001	1,207	1,364	1,583	1,723	10,775
South and Central Asia	626	708	695	721	1,022	1,149	1,232	1,242	1,436	1,668	10,499
Total	44,804	46,307	43,498	45,141	47,893	51,359	52,405	53,739	57,789	60,650	503,585
Percent of Total Births by Region Each Year											2000-2009
Europe	40.08%	38.17%	39.88%	38.97%	38.26%	37.54%	36.40%	32.91%	31.40%	29.89%	35.98%
Eastern Asia and Pacific	20.77%	20.85%	22.23%	22.90%	23.13%	22.73%	22.46%	24.78%	23.64%	24.38%	22.89%
Western Hemisphere	22.65%	24.16%	22.70%	22.42%	22.45%	22.85%	22.73%	24.31%	24.40%	23.62%	23.28%
Near Eastern Asia	13.52%	13.74%	11.85%	12.27%	12.18%	12.69%	13.75%	13.16%	15.34%	16.52%	13.63%
Africa	1.58%	1.54%	1.74%	1.84%	1.85%	1.95%	2.30%	2.54%	2.74%	2.84%	2.14%
South and Central Asia	1.40%	1.53%	1.60%	1.60%	2.13%	2.24%	2.35%	2.31%	2.48%	2.75%	2.08%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: State Department Number of Post Actual CRBA Passports Issued

If we examine country results, Germany, Mexico, Japan and Great Britain account for more than a quarter of total births. Although births per year have declined in Germany over the past ten years, they have grown in Mexico, Japan, Great Britain, Canada, and the Philippines.

Andy Sundberg of American Citizens Abroad (ACA) used this information to calculate the number of U.S. civilians abroad in 2009. When the number of children born abroad in 2009 (60,650) is adjusted using the U.S. national birth rate of 14 children per 1,000, he produces an estimate of 4.3 million.

However, not all overseas families are composed of two U.S. citizen parents. A study conducted in 1980 by the State Department indicated that only about two out of three children born abroad had two US citizen parents. Assuming then that only 65 percent of the families into which a child was born abroad in 2009 had two US citizen parents, the gross estimated number of US citizens abroad, based on the number of births, would be too high and must be adjusted.

Using this 65 percent estimate of two citizen parents and 35 percent of only one citizen parent, the overall number of parents who are US citizens based on births abroad falls to only 83 percent of the original population estimate. Sundberg argues that this implies that the actual number of U.S. citizens living abroad was only 3.6 million in 2009.

Data from Foreign Governments

There is another important data resource that has not been previously utilized and which can be used to create a more accurate estimate of civilian Americans abroad: population estimates produced by foreign governments. Just as the U.S. monitors the number of immigrants living within its borders, so do other governments. Foreign governments collect data in two ways.

First, several countries, such as Germany, require residents to register in the town or city where they live. Because of this requirement we can be very certain about the numbers obtained. For example, in December 2007, the Central Register of Foreigners reported that 99,891 Americans were registered and lived in Germany (Federal Statistical Office of

Germany 2007). This number does not include dual citizens or U.S. military personnel stationed in the country. Austria also has the same requirements.

Second, many countries, such as Ireland, the United Kingdom and Canada, ask questions about foreign origin in their census. For example the United Kingdom produces a series of surveys in addition to its census. The Labour Force Survey (LFS) covers 120,000 respondents per quarter and the Annual Population Survey (APS) around 340,000 respondents. Because of its extra coverage the APS is the best guide for population data. Similar to U.S. population surveys, these studies draw a statistically valid sample and ask respondents their country of origin. From October 2008 to September 2009 the UK APS estimated 189,000 foreign born Americans living in the UK with a confidence level between 0 and 5 percent, indicating plus or minus 18,000 individuals. This estimate is considered precise.

In cooperation with American Citizens Abroad (ACA), OVF attempted to collect information from different foreign governments. The methodology for selecting countries for the study was informal, and there were two criteria for inclusion. First, we considered the size of the country among current population estimates. According to State Department estimates, over half of the American abroad population lives within 20 countries. Furthermore, among OVF's 2008 Post-Election Survey respondents (about 24,000 individuals) 61.1 percent of voters lived in just ten countries.

The second criterion was availability of information. Unfortunately, several European countries (such as Spain and France) do not post this information on their websites and therefore could not be included in this study, whereas others with relatively small U.S. foreign populations (such as Austria) provide usable information. Additionally, not every country provides estimates for every year.

Finally, there are several countries that do not report their immigrant groups by country, but rather by region. Therefore, all immigrants from North America (i.e. Canada and Mexico) are included in their count. Austria is among these countries.

Surprisingly, many countries do not release detailed information about the number of immigrants within their borders. For example, documenting the number of Americans living in Israel can be difficult. During the 2008 presidential election both U.S. political parties widely used the number of 250,000 Americans living and studying in Israel. This estimate was based on the number of university students, estimated number of immigrants, and those returning to America. The 2009 Statistical Abstract of Israel, on the other hand, reports that 88,839 U.S. born individuals immigrated to Israel between 1952 and 2008.

Mexico was also not included in this study, as we were unable to locate any information on their website. Previous research indicates that the number of U.S. Americans living in Mexico is around 1 million, with 600,000 of those living in Mexico City. In 2000, the US Embassy in Mexico City reported 124,082 individuals. Mexico is currently conducting its 2010 census.

Results

As seen in Table 2, our quick survey of these 10 countries accounts for almost one million civilian Americans living abroad. As mentioned above, this modest estimate only includes the countries with the largest American expat communities, and some those (such as Spain, France and Mexico) are missing. Based on State Department estimates and OVF Survey results, if the countries covered here represent 60 percent of the population abroad, then we can approximate about 3 million private citizens living abroad. It is important to note that these numbers are civilian Americans, primarily living overseas indefinitely. They tend not to include university students, dual citizens or military personnel.

Table 2: Americans Abroad, Foreign Government Estimates

	2009	2008	2007	2006	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	2000	10 year average
Australia				61,715							61,715
Austria	8,755	8,422	8,043	7,779	7,527	7,326	7,233	7,350	6,108		7,616
Canada				250,535							250,535
Germany	98,352	100,002	99,891	99,265	97,864	96,642	112,939	112,943			102,237
Ireland				12,475							12,475
Israel		250,000									250,000
Japan				38,581						38,804	38,693
Switzerland		17,757	16,669	15,621	15,335	14,913	14,877	15,005	14,915	14,153	15,472
UK		184,000	188,000	161,000	153,000	145,000					166,200
										Total Ten Year Average:	904,943

Sources: See works cited for detailed list of government agencies used.

There are also several trends that can be observed in Table 1. First, the majority of civilian Americans living abroad live in Canada, the UK, Germany, Israel and Australia. Second, the number of Americans appears to be decreasing in Germany, but is relatively stable across time. The number of Americans in the UK and Switzerland appears to be increasing.

This review has also uncovered some inconsistencies in the reported data. Although the State Department estimates more than 100,000 Americans live in Greece, the Greek Statistical Authority reports that only 1,769 Americans lived in the country in 2006.

The European Commission gathers and stores data from all 27 European Union members in its Eurostat database. This database provides a nice compliment to the data collected from the countries directly. The statistics from Eurostat are able to fill-in some information. For example, although we could not locate any information via the Spanish websites, Eurostat reports that around 33,000 U.S. Americans live in Spain. As seen in Table 3, according the Eurostat, over 500,000 U.S. Americans lived in Europe between 2005 and 2009.

Table 3: Population of U.S. Citizens in EU Countries, 2005 to 2009

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	Average
Belgium	.	.	.	14,603	.	14,603
Bulgaria	.	.	.	166	163	165
Czech Republic	2,668	3,198	3,430	2,488	2,808	2,918
Denmark	9,008	9,170	9,169	10,074	10,326	9,549
Germany	96,642	97,864	109,447	110,368	109,710	104,806
Estonia	.	.	.	.	.	.
Ireland	18,100	20,100	19,963	20,833	21,489	20,097
Greece	.	.	.	.	.	.
Spain	31,633	35,386	30,831	33,067	34,944	33,172
France	48,174	.	.	.	.	48,174
Italy	14,155	14,433	14,904	15,036	15,324	14,770
Cyprus	.	.	.	.	.	.
Latvia	789	844	726	694	750	761
Lithuania	1,475	1,262	1,627	1,741	.	1,526
Luxembourg	.	.	.	.	.	.
Hungary	1,699	1,929	1,931	2,343	2,380	2,056
Malta	.	.	.	155	.	155
Netherlands	22,635	22,769	23,028	23,256	23,986	23,135
Austria	7,964	8,229	8,591	9,060	9,416	8,652
Poland	.	.	.	.	14,011	14,011
Portugal	.	.	8,560	8,733	2,484	6,592
Romania	1,707	.	1,761	2,066	2,545	2,020
Slovenia	676	671	683	652	668	670
Slovakia	3,453	.	.	.	.	3,453
Finland	3,118	3,249	3,465	3,659	3,761	3,450
Sweden	15,301	15,522	15,225	15,309	15,901	15,452
United Kingdom	153,000	161,000	188,000	184,000	.	171,500
						TOTAL: 501,688

Source: European Commission Eurostat

Voting Statistics

If there are between 4 and 3 million private U.S. civilians living abroad (the high and low estimates presented by Sundberg and foreign government data), how many of them voted? What was civilian voter turnout in 2008? The EAC provides statistics on military and civilian overseas voters for the 2008 election. As seen in Table 4, depending on how ballots are defined, between 500,000 and 375,000 ballots were transmitted to U.S. citizens living abroad. The reason for this uncertainty is the larger number of ballots listed as “other voter” and “not categorized.” 221,924 absentee ballots and 9,161 federal write-in absentee ballots (FWABs) were submitted for counting.

Table 4: Overseas Civilian Voter Statistics, 2008

Ballots Transmitted				
	All ballots minus military personnel	Reported as "non-military / civilian"		
	508,450	374,955		
Ballots Submitted for Counting				
	Absentee Ballots	FWABs	Other	Total
	221,924	9,161	42,323	273,408
Ballots Counted				
	Absentee Ballots	FWABs	Other	Total
	179,866	7,609	75,137	262,612

Source: EAC 2008 UOCAVA Survey

The ballot return rate is the number of ballots submitted for counting (not including FWABs) divided by the number of ballots transmitted. In 2008 the ballot return rate for non-military civilian voters was 59.2 percent. The ballot acceptance rate was 81.1 percent and the FWAB acceptance rate was 83 percent. It appears the primary problem facing voters is not the acceptance of a voted ballot, but returning the ballot on time.

If voter turnout is defined as the number of people who attempted to vote (total ballots submitted for counting or 273,408) divided by the total population (approximately 4 million), approximately 6.8 percent of the overseas civilian population attempted to participate and were successful in doing so.

Disenfranchisement?

Six to seven percent is a very low turnout rate. Is this turnout rate due to disinterest among the population or because of widespread disenfranchisement? The answer may be a little bit of both. As Judith Murray describes in her article *The American Diaspora*, many Americans move abroad because they make a conscious choice to do so (i.e. ideological reasons, health care, private relationships). Thus, not all Americans who live abroad may want to vote.

Disenfranchisement is a strong word, and indicates that a state has consciously denied someone their right to vote or rendered their vote ineffective. Thus, disenfranchisement can be either explicit in the law or implicit, such as unreasonable registration requirements or other impediments in the path of voters.

In the case of civilian voters abroad, disenfranchisement can be measured as the percent of individuals who attempt or want to vote but are unable to complete the process because of a complicated process that impedes voters. Survey results give us the individual perspective. In the OVF 2008 post-election survey, 4 percent of respondents tried but were unable to complete the registration process. 22 percent of respondents who requested a ballot never received one. This would indicate that about a quarter of overseas voters were disenfranchised because they could not complete the lengthy registration process, or they did not complete it properly, or they did not get a ballot.

A more accurate measure would be the number of voters who submit registration and/or ballot request forms that are disqualified. Unfortunately, the EAC no longer collects data on overseas voter registration and ballot request rejection. Although the ballot return rate (59 percent) and ballot acceptance rate (81 percent) may be low, this could be the result of poor election administration, which is not the same as disenfranchisement.

As described in the article, *Citizenship Does not Equal Voting Rights*, by Clair Whitmer, American children born abroad are most likely to be disenfranchised. Although these children obtain citizenship at birth, not all of them are allowed to vote. Only 18 states currently allow children born to parents abroad to vote. As described above, the State Department released figures in early 2010 indicating that over 500,000 children born abroad were issued passports between 2000 and 2009. As Ms. Whitmer points out, even though Americans born abroad are U.S. citizens in every respect, including being obliged to pay federal taxes; they are disenfranchised in 32 states.

Conclusion

The number of civilian Americans living abroad will continue to be debated until the U.S. Census Bureau or State Department conduct a more intensive study. This article demonstrates that there are untapped information resources that could be used to better answer the question. The data indicate that the number of civilian Americans living abroad hovers around 4 million. However, without detailed demographic information, there is no indication of how many of these individuals are eligible to vote.

Approximately 6 to 7 percent of civilians living abroad voted in the 2008 election. There is evidence that a large portion of the population was not successful in its attempt to participate. The largest problem for Americans abroad is not having their ballot rejected, but ensuring that their ballot is returned on time. Because we do not know how many voter registration and ballot request forms are rejected, we cannot accurately identify the level of disenfranchisement among this population of voters.

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