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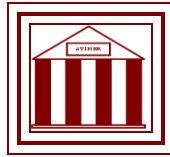
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New Approaches to Promote Overseas Voting

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An Introduction to
ATINER's Conference Paper Series

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
President
Athens Institute for Education and Research

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Abstract

Voting presents a major challenge to many citizens who are located abroad during an election. The options offered by many countries, which include voting at an embassy or using a mailed absentee ballot, are not always convenient or practical. Moreover, some overseas citizens are not even aware of all of the voting options available to them. Maryland implemented a new internet-based absentee ballot delivery system prior to the 2010 US election. We conducted an experiment to assess the impact of the different email messages used to introduce the new system on overseas and military voters' propensities to learn about and use it. Our findings show that email communications that have a concise subject line, source credibility, feature a citizens' reference groups, and provide just enough information to arouse curiosity are the likely to be opened and to encourage the new system to be used. They also demonstrate that citizens located abroad, in allied countries, and in countries that are not experience significant conflict are more likely to use the system than those located in the US, non-allied countries, or in countries at war or experiencing significant turmoil. Our findings have

implications for improving elections in other US states and possibly other countries. They also have implications for individuals, political parties, governments, and other organizations interested in boosting voter participation among military and overseas voters.

Keywords:

Corresponding Author:

One of the challenges facing many democracies is making it easier for citizens abroad to vote. Some countries post absentee ballots through the mail, while others set up polling stations at their embassies and consulates. In 2007, only two countries allowed their overseas citizens to vote via the Internet. However, other recent innovations involve online ballot delivery. Whether a procedure for overseas voting can be deemed successful depends on several factors, including the design of the voting system, the convenience it offers, including to citizens in hazardous situations such as war zones, and the attributes of the outreach efforts used to encourage potential voters to use it.

This paper reports on the results of a field experiment that randomly assigned different email messages to alert overseas citizens and members of the military about a new Internet-based absentee ballot system prior to its first implementation. We combine information about the messages' content with individuals' voting histories and milieu (i.e., geographic location and social situation), and the method they used to vote in the 2010 US general election. Our results show that an email mobilization message that is concisely written, has source credibility, invokes a voter's reference groups, and provides just enough information to arouse the voter's curiosity will encourage voters to participate in an election with a convenient, easy-to-use internet-based ballot delivery method. The results also demonstrate that a voter's propensity to use such a system, and vote in general, is to some degree contingent on whether that individual is located abroad, in a country that shares an alliance with their country of citizenship, or in a nation that is regarded as conflict zone.

The Challenges of Casting a Vote from Abroad

Globalization has led to an increasing number of individuals who relocate permanently or temporarily to another country. In 2005, the number of global emigrants reached close to 190 million (International Organization of Migration, 2010). Roughly 115 countries provide such citizens with some form of voting rights (Ellis et al., 2007). Politics, particularly electoral competition, provides the major explanation for why some countries extend voting rights and others do not (Lafleur, 2011: Harutyunyan & Rhodes, 2010).

Most countries began exploring the idea of voting rights for citizens abroad during World War I and World War II. This was, in part, a result of the mass movement of soldiers around the globe. However, by the 1980s relatively few nations, including Spain and the US, had enacted national legislation to address the issue. Most of the countries that provide voting rights to citizens located outside their borders did not begin to do so until the dawn of the twenty-first the century.

Countries have provided a variety of options for enabling citizens abroad to exercise the right to vote. These range from in person voting at a designated embassy or other location(s) to postal voting, to electronic voting. In 2007, 54 countries used in person voting and 25 opted for postal voting (Ellis et al., 2007). Only Estonia and the Netherlands used some form of Internet voting.

Most countries place some restrictions on voting by citizens abroad. Fourteen countries deny voting rights to those who have been abroad for an extended period. For example, the United Kingdom provides voting rights only to citizens who have been away from the country for less than 10 years. Sixty-six countries permit citizens abroad to participate in either presidential or national legislative elections, but, they are barred from participating in state (provincial) and local elections. These policies depress voter turnout of these countries' diaspora communities (Lafleur, 2011).

The US Experience

The US path to voting rights for citizens abroad was evolutionary, with the first bills passed in the 1940s. Congress and the states continued to pass several pieces of legislation to address the challenges of overseas citizens who wish to vote. These include the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Voting Act (UOCAVA) in 1986 and parts of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) in 2002.[1]

Despite these efforts, turnout for this group was estimated at only13.7% in 2008.[2] Time is one of the major challenges to overseas voters, as the process of obtaining and casting a ballot can take anywhere from two weeks to two-and-a-half months to complete (Pew Center on the States 2009, 40) and is a major hindrance to participation (see Hall & Smith, 2011; Cain, MacDonald & Murakami, 2008). During the 2008 election, only 69% of the ballots sent to overseas voters were returned, and more than 7% of these ballots were rejected—primarily because they missed the deadline for counting (U.S. Election Assistance Commission [EAC], 2009). Further, more than half of all overseas citizens who did not return an absentee ballot reported it either failed to arrive or it arrived too late to vote (Overseas Vote Foundation [OVF], 2009).

Compounding time-related issues are factors related to where US military or overseas voters (herein referred to as UOCAVA voters) are located. Citizens located in conflict zones or in nations that have poor relations with the US, such as Iran, find it more challenging to vote than those located in London, Paris, or other major cities in industrialized democracies that have longstanding alliances relations with the US. Not only are members of the first two groups less likely to have routine access to regular mail or communications devices, their exposure to news coverage of an upcoming US election is likely to be more limited. Concerns about personal security and creature comforts undoubtedly take precedent over initiating absentee ballot procedures among

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[1] UOCAVA establishes the federal framework for overseas voting; whereas state laws provide for implementation. The UOCAVA covers citizens who are active members of the Uniformed Services, the Merchant Marines, the commissioned corps of the Public Health Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, their family members and other citizens residing outside the United States.

[2] The overseas voting eligible population was 4,972,217 in 2008 (McDonald, 2008) and 680,460 votes were cast by UOCAVA voters (EAC, 2009, 30).

members of the armed forces and others located in countries at war or experience substantial internal upheaval.

The Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment (MOVE) Act, passed in 2009, sought to address time considerations on the front-end of the voting process by mandating that states offer an electronic alternative to the traditional posted mail absentee ballot. In 2010, all 50 states provided for the transmission of a blank ballot to UOCAVA voters in an electronic form (mainly by email or a downloadable online document); up from 20 states in 2008.

Maryland responded to the MOVE Act by introducing an electronic absentee ballot delivery system (EABDS) for delivering blank ballots online. The EABDS provides voters with the same ballot, instructions, and other materials that accompany a traditional mail absentee ballot. To arrange for a ballot to be delivered via EABDS, voters may simply check the appropriate box on their absentee ballot request form and provide their email address. The form is available in paper and online from state's board of elections and county boards of elections. The Federal Voter Assistance Program and some nonprofit organizations (including OVF) also provide access to the online form. Citizens who have opted to use the EABDS receive an email notifying them when their ballot is ready and instructions on how to download it, an absentee-ballot affidavit, and mailing label from a secure website.[1] Once they download and print the ballot, voters fill it in and return it, as they would a paper absentee ballot.

Theory and Hypotheses

The introduction of electronically-delivered ballots, like most election reforms implemented in the US over the last several decades, aims to make it easier to vote.[2] Although many scholars assume that lowering the costs of voting will increase turnout (e.g., Downs, 1957), most of the literature shows that voter registration reforms (e.g., Rosenstone & Wolfinger, 1980) and convenience voting methods, including early in-person voting and no excuse absentee voting (Gronke et al., 2007, 2008; Cain, Donovan, & Tolbert, 2008), do little to boost turnout (Berinsky, 2005; Hanmer et al., 2009). Moreover, convenience reforms tend to exacerbate the turnout gap between the resource rich and resource poor, as these reforms work mainly as substitutes to Election Day voting for those who were already likely to vote rather than forces that mobilize the least engaged (Berinsky, 2005; but see Stein & Vonnahme, 2008).

Nevertheless, important questions remain regarding the introduction of electronically-delivered ballots and their use by the voters they were intended to assist. First, given that few individuals are initially aware of new voting

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[1]In its original implementation, studied here, the items were identical to those received with a traditional mail absentee ballot, except voters had to print them out and received a mailing label instead of a self-addressed envelope.

[2]The exceptions to this trend are restrictive laws passed in some states, such as photo identification requirements.

methods prior to their introduction, what is the impact of an information campaign on their propensities to use them or turnout to vote in general? Second, given that most UOCAVA voters are not in the location where they are registered to vote, what is the influence of milieu on how or whether they vote? Milieu refers to both the location and social situation in which an individual is imbedded. We anticipate that one's participation in an election will be affected by whether they are located in a modern industrialized democracy or an outpost in a war-torn underdeveloped nation governed by a weak or an authoritarian regime. We also anticipate that differences in the social of military personnel and overseas civilians will lead to differences in the participation military and non-military overseas citizens.

Regarding the impact of information campaigns on voting, most research has demonstrated that personal approaches, such as door-to-door canvassing, are more effective than impersonal approaches, such as email, because the former are based on stronger social connections (Green & Gerber, 2008; Nickerson, 2007; Bennion & Nickerson, 2011). However, some studies demonstrate that a personal connection may not be necessary for an information or mobilization campaign to have the desired effect on some voters (Dale & Strauss, 2009). Specifically, individuals who by their actions demonstrate they have a strong interest in voting, such as those who opt on to an email list that provides information about voting procedures, are more likely than others to be influenced by impersonal messages. Moreover, under some circumstances, the timing, cost, and the lack of geographic concentration of voters, particularly UOCAVA voters, can make personalized mobilization techniques unfeasible.

Research on survey methodology and marketing demonstrate that the message source, subject heading, and body of an email influence the behavior of the recipients in ways that may be applicable to the study of the impact of information campaigns on the use of new voting methods. Government sources result in the highest response rates to surveys (Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978). Short subject lines are associated with a more positive response rates than long ones, which is of little surprise given that some email systems limit the number of characters that are visible (Donahue, 2009; Stallings, 2009).

Combined these literatures inform our first hypothesis: an email communication that has a concise subject line, source credibility, connects with voters by mentioning one or more of their reference groups, and provides just enough information about a new voting method to arouse curiosity is more likely to be opened than others. Our second hypothesis is that an email that has both a subject line and a message body with the aforementioned characteristics, should encourage voters to use the new method to vote and increase voter turnout. This should be especially the case for voters abroad, who have only limited exposure to news about an upcoming election.

Regarding the effects of milieu on voting, studies dating back to the 1940s have demonstrated the importance of political settings and social conditions on partisan attitudes and voting behavior (Lazarsfeld, Berekson, & Gaudet, 1968; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Huckfeldt,

1986; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995). The community in which a voter resides has an impact on the election-related communications received (Goldstein & Freedman, 2002), discussions of politics (Kinder, 1998), and voting behavior (Campbell, 2006). The impact of location on voting is also a function of convenience. Gimpel & Schuknecht (2003) demonstrate driving distance to the polling place and commuting conditions have a significant impact on turnout.

We build on studies that focus on location to take into consideration conditions that pose more adversities than the miles and traffic jams that separate a voter from a polling place. The first aspect of milieu we consider concerns the country where a voter resides. It informs our third hypothesis: voters in nations experiencing significant conflict will have the lowest levels of voter participation levels and make less use of the new ballot delivery system of any UOCAVA voters. Among their many deficiencies, nations experiencing major conflict fall short in the delivery of electricity, mail, and other basic services—most notably personal security (Collier 1999; Stewart 2003). They also provide less coverage of US elections, in part, because greater restrictions are placed on their media. These conditions should have a detrimental impact on both a voter's interest in and ability to receive or return an electronically-delivered ballot or, for that matter vote with a traditional mail absentee ballot.

Similarly, our fourth hypothesis is that UOCAVA voters situated in a nation that shares an alliance with the US faces fewer voting challenges than voters residing in a nation that does not. Most US allies possess political environments that should facilitate American citizens learning about and participating in discussions concerning US elections. Most US allies support the freedoms of speech, assembly, and other democratic norms, and their media cover American politics. The same is not true of many nations with which the US does not share an alliance (Siverson & Emmons 1991; Lai & Reiter 2000). Thus, residing in an allied nation should have a positive impact on the turnout of UOCAVA voters and their propensities to use a new voting method.

Finally, there's no place like home, especially for encouraging voter turnout. Military personnel and civilians who normally reside overseas but find themselves temporarily located in the US typically have a very different voting experience than other UOCAVA voters. They receive the same campaign communications that inundate US citizens who reside domestically. They also can more easily converse with family, friends, and others about politics. Our fifth hypothesis is that these individuals are among the most likely UOCAVA voters to participate in an election. However, because they can choose among an array of domestic voting options, including Election Day, provisional, and in many cases early or traditional mail absentee voting, we hypothesize that fewer of them will vote with an electronically-delivered absentee ballot.[1]

Another aspect of milieu we consider is a citizen's immediate social environment, specifically military status. Members of the armed forces differ from most overseas citizens in that they work and reside on military bases,

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[1]We also expect them to make less use of the federal write-in ballot absentee, which is often considered a voting option of last resort because it enables a voter to write-in the name of federal candidates only.

which results in daily personal interactions with other US citizens and greater access to US news. The US government encourages voter turnout among members of the armed forces, and the military has implemented nonpartisan programs to encourage their electoral participation (Cain, MacDonald & Murakami, 2008).

Data and Research Methods

We test these hypotheses using a field experiment involving data collected from UOCAVA voters registered to vote in Maryland. Maryland has a mid-sized population, a professional state government, and its electoral competitiveness is similar to that of many US states.[1] Generally considered an innovator in election reform (Palazzolo, 2005; Gimpel & Dyck, 2005), the state implemented the EABDS in time for the 2010 elections. The new system was fairly widely among the state's UOCAVA voters. It accounted for 36.9% of the 10,693 absentee ballots they requested in the 2010 general election, and 41.6% of the 2,711 ballots they returned. Traditional mail ballots accounted the remaining 63.1% sent and 58.4% returned. It is noteworthy that the return rate for ballots sent via EABDS was 28.6%, compared to only 23.5% for ballots delivered by mail.

We contacted registered Maryland voters located overseas using an email list compiled by the Overseas Voter Foundation, a nonpartisan organization created to, 'facilitate and increase participation of American overseas voters and military voters and their dependents in federal elections by providing public access to innovative voter registration tools and services' (www.overseasvotefoundation.org/about-our-mission). The emails were sent using the *VerticalResponse* mailing system, which tracks open rates, bounces, and unsubscribe requests. This system allowed us to determine whether the individual received the message that was sent.

To test our hypotheses regarding on the impact of email communications on voter participation, we randomly assigned the roughly 1,400 registered Maryland voters on OVF's email list to one of four groups.[2] The first group received the *Maryland policy innovation* (MPI) message, which highlighted the state and its new policy (see Table 1).[3] The subject heading was: 'Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters.' Leading with the name of the state was intended to give the message credibility, identifying the recipient's reference groups (Marylanders and overseas voters) was meant to create a personal connection, and mentioning a policy innovation was intended arouse curiosity. We hypothesize that these characteristics, along with the message's

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[1]Maryland's population closely is somewhat more racially diverse, more educated, and more affluent than the national average. The state's politics have been historically dominated by one-party (the Democrats), but reasonable two-party competition is evident as Republicans have recently run competitive races for governor and occupied the governor's mansion.
[2]Our sample was too small to individually test each of the message's components.
[3]The full text of the messages can be obtained by contacting the authors.

clarity and focus, should increase the likelihood of the email being opened. The top of the email contained a policy alert that presented similar information. We anticipate that this email should have the most positive impact on voter turnout and EABDS usage**.**

Table 1. *Experimental Treatments*

Group/Message	Subject Line/Policy Alert
MD policy innovation	Subject: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters Policy Alert: Policy reaches out to overseas voters
OVF policy innovation	Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters Policy Alert: Policy reaches out to overseas voters
OVF standard outreach	Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert Policy Alert: Facts only
Control	Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert Policy Alert: None

The second group received the *OVF policy innovation* (OVFPI) message, which was nearly identical to the MPI message. Its only difference was the subject line was longer and contained superfluous language (OVF's name). This could distract the recipient or, even worse, crop the most important part of the message. Thus, this message was less likely to lead voters to open the email and, as a result, less likely to boost voter turnout or EABDS usage.

The third group received the OVF's *standard outreach* (OVFSO) message. The subject line had none of the features we hypothesized would encourage a recipient to open it. The policy alert presented facts about the new voting method but no appeal to overseas voters regarding the state's efforts to address their particular interests. We anticipated the recipients of this message would be less likely to be open the email, vote, or use the EABDS than those who received one of the previous messages.

The last group received the *Control* message that forms our basis for comparison. It was identical to the OVFSO message except that it had no policy alert. Some information about the voting innovation was included, but it was presented indirectly at the end of the message as a part of the instructions for obtaining a ballot. Given OVF's mission, we were unable to assign a traditional control group that received no information. Because everyone received some information about the election and the new policy, our test of the effect of the email communication on turnout and the use of the EABDS are conservative.

We use four variables to test our milieu hypotheses. *Conflict zone* records whether a nation was experiencing a significant international or internal struggle (e.g., Gleditsch et al., 2002; Themnér & Wallensteen, 2011). *US ally* indicates that a nation shared a formal alliance with the United States, and thereby should provide UOCAVA voters with an environment likely to

stimulate electoral participation and facilitate the use of the EABDS.[1] *In the US* indicates that the voter was located in their home state or somewhere else in the US on Election Day. *Military personnel* is important because UOCAVA voters in the military experience routinized interactions with other US citizens, are exposed to programs intended to encourage turnout, and many are located in the US.

Results

Can the wording of an email message increase the probability that a recipient will open it, use a new voting system, and participate in an election? Does the recipient's milieu also have an impact? Figure 1 demonstrates that many of these factors matter. UOCAVA voters who receive an email with an effectively worded subject line are about 7 percentage points more likely to open the email than others ($p<.10$). Citizens who reside abroad are almost 17 percentage points more likely to open an email concerning absentee voting than domestic UOCAVA voters ($p< .001$). The differences among voters located in allied countries and nation's experiencing conflict are in the expected direction, but fall short of conventional levels of statistical significance. Finally, members of the armed forces are substantially less likely to open the email than civilian overseas voters ($p<.05$).

Figure 1. *The Impact of Message and Milieu on Opening the Email*
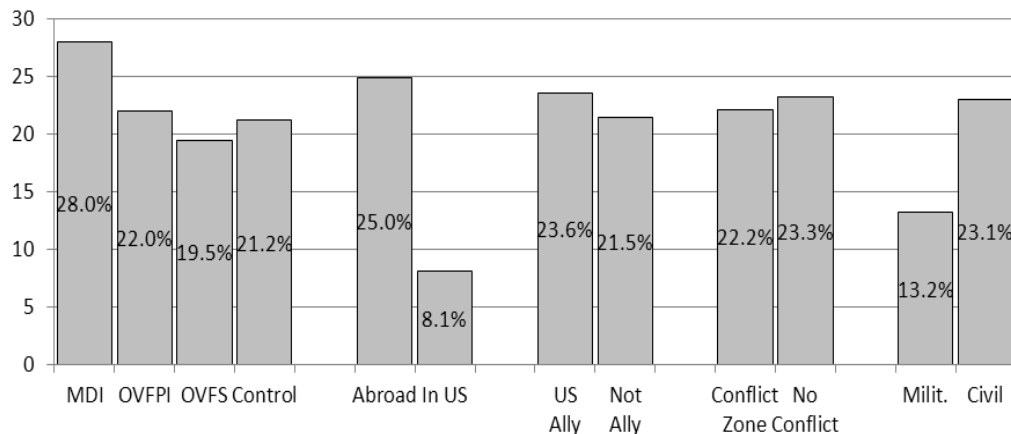

Figure 2 provides the results for our hypotheses tests about impact of the new ballot delivery system on voting. It demonstrates that citizens who received the MPI message were at least 5 percentage points more likely to use the EABDS and 4 percentage points more likely to vote than those receiving other messages ($p<.001$ for EABDS usage; $p<.023$ for voting in general).

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[1] This variable is constructed using the Correlates of War Project's Formal Alliance date (Gibler, 2009) and information from the Department of State.

**Figure 2.** *The Impact of Message and Milieu on Voter Participation*
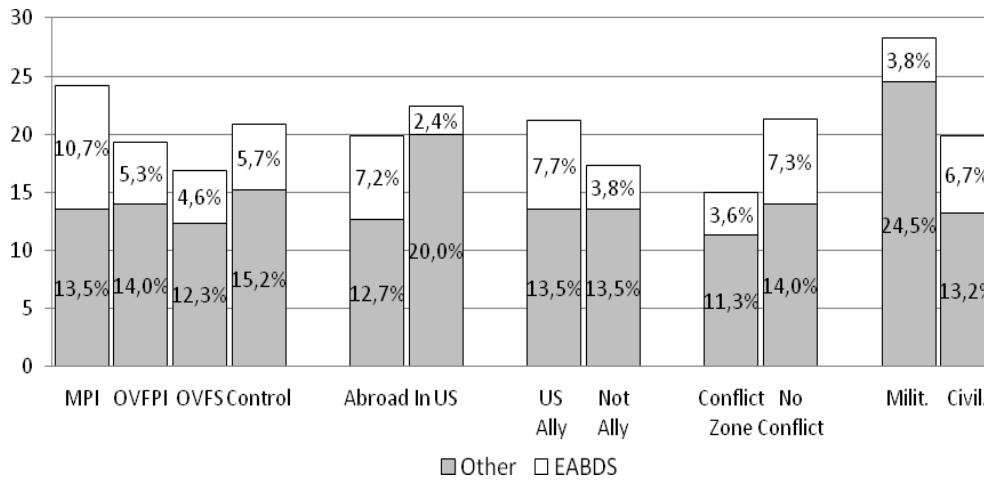
As expected, voters residing abroad were substantially more likely to use the online ballot delivery system (p<.02), but appear to be somewhat less likely to vote in general (p<.25). Similarly, voters located in countries that have alliances with the US or in countries that are not experiencing significant conflict made greater use of the new system (p<.01 for allies; p<.03 for conflict) and had higher voter turnout than others (p<.08; p<.02).

Finally, overseas civilians may have made somewhat greater use of the new system (p<.20), but they had lower turnout than military voters (p<.07). This is probably a function of the civilians' greater likelihood of opening the email introducing the new voting system and the fact that military officers assigned to assist military voters tend to encourage the use of traditional mail absentee ballots because of a lack familiarity with the voting innovations introduced by the 50 states and the District of Columbia (Dietz, 2013).

Our final set of results focuses on the impact of the MPI message on electoral participation of overseas citizens and military personnel. The evidence in Figure 3 demonstrates that the message has a substantially larger impact on the propensities of UOCAVA voters abroad to use the new ballot delivery system than those located domestically (p<.05). Absent the new system and the MPI message, many overseas voters may not have cast a ballot.

Figure 3. *The Impact of the Maryland Policy Innovation Message on Voter Participation by Milieu*
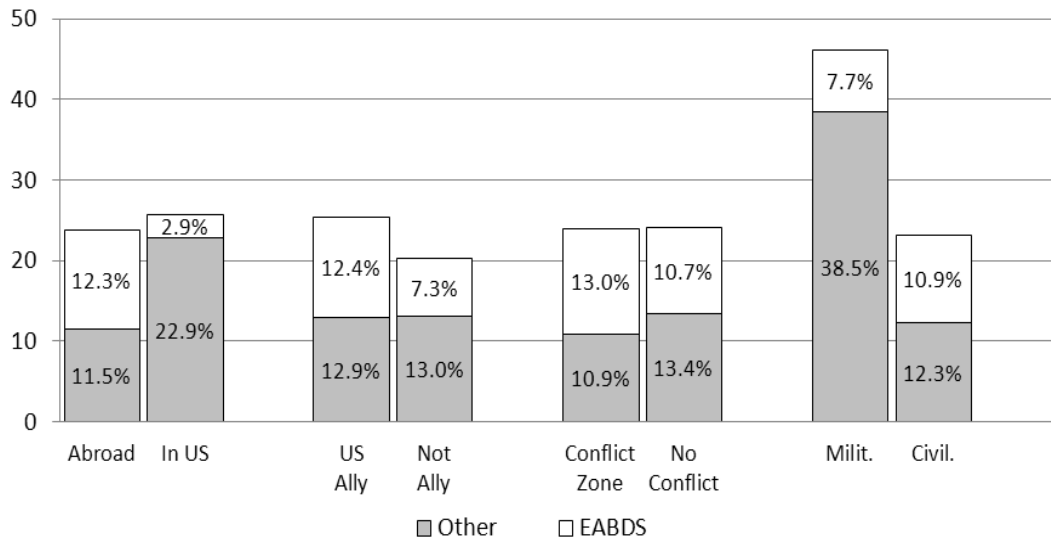
Note: Includes only respondents who received the MPI message.

The message also has a greater impact on the voting system used by citizens residing in countries that share an alliance with the US (p<.12). Although not statistically significant and contrary to our expectations, the findings suggest that the MPI message had a slightly larger impact on EABDS usage by voters in nations at conflict than those at peace (p<.32). Not surprisingly, the findings also suggest that the MPI message appears to have had a somewhat lesser effect on EABDS usage among military personnel than civilians (p<.36).

Conclusion

Elections are at the core of democratic politics. However, not all citizens have equal opportunities to participate in them. Among those facing the most serious challenges are overseas citizens and military personnel. Generally unable to use the voting methods available to most domestic voters, receiving only limited exposure to campaign communications, and sometimes located in milieus that do not lend themselves to political participation, many of these individuals are deprived of the opportunity to vote. Attempts by some democracies to accommodate these citizens' circumstances have had limited success for a number of reasons. Some absentee voting approaches, including traditional mail ballots or voting in embassies, can pose logistical challenges, and others, such as those that rely on new technologies could be made more voter-friendly. Moreover, voters need to first become aware of a new absentee voting system if they are to use it. Our case study of an internet-based absentee ballot delivery system introduced by Maryland in 2010 suggests that an effectively-worded email message can have a positive impact on the number of overseas citizens and members of the military who learn about and use a new

voting system, and it can boost participation by members of these groups, including those residing in conflict-ridden locations. Whether these generalizations are applicable to other US states and other countries is an open question. Regardless, the findings of this study may be useful to individuals, political parties, governments, and other organizations that are interested in boosting voter participation among military and other overseas voters.

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