# Message, milieu, technology, and turnout among military and overseas voters☆

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ABSTRACT

Voting presents a challenge to military personnel and overseas citizens. Mail absentee ballots are often unreliable, and many citizens are unaware of their full range of voting options. Following implementation of a new internet-based ballot delivery system, we assessed the impact of the different email messages used to introduce it. Our findings show that communications with a concise subject line, source credibility, and that feature a citizen's reference groups encourage system usage. These communications also promote greater usage and turnout among citizens located in nations experiencing conflict, in allied nations, and abroad. Our findings have implications for scholars and political practitioners.
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## 1. Introduction

One of the challenges facing many democracies is making it easier for citizens abroad to vote. Globalization has led many individuals to relocate permanently or temporarily to another country. In 2005, the number of global emigrants reached close to 190 million (International Organization of Migration, 2010). The US, alone, has roughly 5 million eligible voters who reside overseas—a group that is larger than the eligible voting populations of 38 states, including six states considered battlegrounds in both the 2008 and 2012 presidential elections.[3] These potential voters include armed services personnel and their families, government and private sector employees, and college students studying abroad. Facilitating voting for such large and diverse groups of citizens is one of modern democracy's greatest challenges.

[3] The figures voting eligible populations in 2008 are from McDonald (2009) and US Election Assistance Commission (2009, 30). On battlegrounds, see, e.g., Battleground States, Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/graphic/2008/06/08/GR2008060800566.html and Battlegrounds 2012, National Journal, http://www.nationaljournal.com/Battlegrounds-2012.

Roughly 115 countries, including the US, have responded to the challenge by providing some form of voting rights and services (Ellis et al., 2007). Some countries post absentee ballots through the mail, while others set up polling stations at their embassies and consulates. In 2007, two countries allowed their overseas citizens to vote via the Internet. More recent innovations introduced in some states in the US involve online ballot delivery followed by postal return. Whether these, or any, procedure for overseas voting can be deemed successful depends on several factors, such as 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.

Military and overseas voters must jump higher hurdles to cast a ballot than other citizens. Nevertheless, their votes can make a difference in close elections (Curtis, 2010) and candidates, including those for the US presidency, actively campaign for them (Curry, 2012). Innovations in voting technology may lower some hurdles (e.g., Hall Alvarez and Hall, 2004). However, they are unlikely to enhance turnout if voters are unaware of the new methods or reside in locations that make it difficult to use them. While our study focuses on military and overseas voters from the US, it has implications for others, including citizens of other countries, and voters who travel frequently, attend college away from home, or find it difficult to get to the polls.

We address three questions as they pertain to military and overseas voting: Does providing citizens with information about a new voting method encourage its use? Does the presentation and content of this information matter, both in terms of the method's usage and voter turnout in general? And, does the milieu—i.e., the geographic location and social context—in which potential voters find themselves during an election have an impact on their political participation and responsiveness to different messages?

Using data for US military and overseas citizens registered to vote in Maryland, we find that an effectively-worded email message can increase the use of a new voting method and, in some circumstances, improve voter turnout. Whether a voter is located in the US, an allied country, or a conflict zone also is important. The new voting system we study was relatively inexpensive to develop, can provide voters with a ballot in a matter of minutes rather than weeks, and reduces the costs of delivering absentee ballots. These features have the potential to address both of the key issues common to overseas citizens: 1) low turnout; and 2) high rates of ballot rejection, usually driven by ballots that arrive too late to be counted. Given the potential problems associated with getting and returning a traditional absentee ballot, it is important to understand better the circumstances under which potential voters (new and habitual) will use a new electronic absentee ballot delivery system. Doing so can better inform election administrators, citizen groups, and political actors on how to ensure ballots quickly get to those who request them, which in turn should increase the chances that the ballots are returned on time. In addition to having implications for voters besides the population we studied, the results have ramifications for election administrators, political practitioners, reform advocates, and scholars interested in voter mobilization, political communication, and election reform.

## 2. Reform, overseas voters, and political mobilization

The US Congress and the states have passed several pieces of legislation to address the obstacles overseas citizens confront when trying to vote. These include the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA), enacted in 1986, and parts of the Help America Vote Act (HAVA), enacted in 2002.[4] Despite these efforts, turnout for this group was estimated at only 13.7% in 2008.[5]

Time is one of the major impediments to overseas voting. The process of obtaining and casting a ballot requires significant foresight. It can take anywhere from two weeks to two-and-a-half months to complete (Pew Center on the States, 2009) and is a major hindrance to participation (Hall and Smith, 2011; Cain, MacDonald, and Murakami, 2008). During the 2008 election, only 69% of the ballots sent to overseas voters were returned (Election Assistance Commission [EAC] 2009). 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). Moreover, 7% of the ballots returned by overseas voters were rejected, primarily because they missed the deadline for counting (US Election Assistance Commission, 2009).

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 mail ballot. In 2010, all 50 states and Washington, DC provided for the electronic transmission of a blank ballot to military and overseas votes (hereafter referred to as UOCAVA voters): 44 states used email, 5 used downloadable online documents, and 2 used fax.

Maryland responded to the MOVE Act by introducing an electronic absentee ballot delivery system (EABDS) for delivering blank ballots online. Generally considered an innovator in election reform (Palazzolo, 2005; Gimpel and Dyck, 2005), the state implemented the new system in time for the 2010 election. The EABDS provides voters with the same ballot, instructions, and affidavit distributed with traditional mail absentee ballots. In lieu of a pre-printed envelope, one receives instructions on how to print the appropriate address on an envelope the voter supplies. To arrange for a ballot to be delivered via EABDS, voters simply check the appropriate box on their absentee ballot request form (available from the state's or counties' boards of elections and government websites, and websites sponsored nongovernmental organizations) and provide their

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[4] UOCAVA establishes the federal framework for overseas voting (state laws provide details and cover implementation). It 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 US.

[5] See note 3.

email address. Those who opt to use the EABDS receive an email notifying them when their ballot is ready and instructions on how to download it from a secure website. Once they download and print the ballot, voters fill it in and return it, as they would a paper absentee ballot.

The introduction of electronically-delivered ballots, like most election reforms implemented over the last several decades, aims to make voting easier.[6] 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., Wolfinger and Rosenstone, 1980) and convenience voting methods, including early in-person voting and no excuse absentee voting (Gronke et al., 2007, 2008; Cain, Donovan, and Tolbert, 2008), do little to boost turnout (Berinsky, 2005; Hanmer, 2009). Moreover, convenience reforms have been found to exacerbate the turnout gap between the resource rich and the resource poor, as these reforms work mainly as substitutes to Election Day voting for those who are already likely to vote, rather than forces that mobilize the least engaged (Berinsky, 2005; but see Stein and Vonnahme, 2008).

It is important to recognize that this is not necessarily the case for all UOCAVA voters. The resolve of some suggests that this group may be more motivated to vote than other citizens. But, factors related to where they are located compound the challenges associated with requesting a ballot and receiving it in a timely manner. Most UOCAVA voters reside beyond the reach of local and often national media markets, well outside the jurisdictions targeted by foot and telephone canvassers, and far from communities where their family, friends, and neighbors discuss elections and go to vote. Many are excluded from most of the information and excitement that accompanies an election, which can seem, and literally be, halfway across the globe. Among UOCAVA voters, the hurdles faced by first time voters or first-time absentee voters are especially daunting. Not yet in the habit of routinely voting, there is little in these voters' political socialization that lends itself to seeking information about the steps needed to request an absentee ballot.

Political geography and social setting also pose more formidable barriers to some UOCAVA voters than others. For example, citizens in countries experiencing significant conflict or having poor relations with the US are likely to find it more difficult to vote than citizens elsewhere. Citizens in these circumstances typically have less access to traditional mail or electronic communication devices, making it more difficult to obtain and cast a ballot. They also probably receive less news about American politics and interact with fewer US citizens on a daily basis.

In summary, UOCAVA voters may be more motivated than domestic voters, but the structural, informational, time-related, and behavioral obstacles often deter those who want to vote from doing so. The hurdles UOCAVA voters must overcome to participate in an election make it a mistake to describe them as resource rich voters. Their

abysmal turnout levels reinforce this point. Although the uniqueness of this group may limit our ability to generalize our findings to nonvoters, the US Congress's and the state legislatures' responses to their plight signify the importance of conducting research that enables scholars and policymakers to find ways to address the unique circumstances of this group.

### 2.1. The introduction of new voting methods

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 methods prior to their introduction, what is the impact of an information campaign on their propensities to use one or vote in general? Second, if most UOCAVA voters are located far from where they are registered to vote, does their milieu condition their response to the specific message they receive?

With regard to the first question, most research on voter mobilization establishes 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 and Gerber, 2008; Nickerson, 2007; Areceneaux and Nickerson, 2009; Bennion and Nickerson, 2011; Panagopoulos, 2011). However, some studies show that a personal connection may not be necessary for an information or mobilization campaign to have the desired effect on some voters (Dale and 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. Further evidence suggests that impersonal online communications boost participation in online political activities, despite their limited impact on traditional offline methods of participation (Vissers et al., 2012). In sum, the finding that impersonal mobilization techniques do little to boost in-person or mail voting among most voters does not rule out the possibility that email communications can have a positive impact on voters' use of an online absentee ballot, especially for those who wish to vote but confront the significant obstacles encountered by UOCAVA voters.

Research on survey methodology and marketing indicate that the message source, subject heading, and body of an email influence the behavior of the recipients in ways that are applicable to the study of the impact of information campaigns on the use of new voting methods. Government surveys have an aura of legitimacy that helps them receive the highest response rates (Heberlein and 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 findings suggest that a well-crafted email message that provides information about a new voting method may encourage voter participation, especially among UOCAVA voters, who are motivated to vote but have only limited exposure to news about an upcoming election or voting innovations.

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[6] The exceptions are photo identification and other restrictive laws passed in some US states.

## 2.2. Hypotheses

Compared to domestic voters and the techniques used to educate and mobilize them, little is known about UOCAVA voters and the impact of email communications on their electoral participation. However, the above litera- ture provides a suitable foundation for our expectations regarding the effects of email on UOCAVA voters. We anticipate that a message that 1) has source credibility; 2) is sent to individuals who have some commitment to voting; 3) reminds the recipients of attachments to their home state or other reference groups; and 4) concisely identifies a method that lowers the costs of voting (so as to attract the recipient's attention and curiosity) should be effective in promoting individuals to use a new voting system. These insights inform our hypotheses for the impact of informa- tion campaigns on voter mobilization and the use of new voting methods:

**H1)**. The turnout hypothesis: a clear concise email mes- sage that has source credibility, primes recipients to think about their personal ties to their state and other UOCAVA voters, and introduces a method that reduces the costs of voting will increase the probability an individual will vote.

**H2)**. The conversion hypothesis: the message described in H1 will increase the probability an individual will use the new voting method.

Regarding milieu, studies dating back to the 1940s emphasize the importance of geographic location and social setting on partisan attitudes and voting behavior (Lazarsfeld et al., [1944], 1968; Berelson et al., 1954; Campbell et al., 1960; Huckfeldt and Sprague, 1995). The community where a voter resides has an impact on the election-related communications received (e.g., Goldstein and Freedman, 2002), discussions of politics (Kinder, 1998), and voting behavior (Campell, 2006). The impact of location on voting is also a function of convenience. Gimpel and Schuknecht (2003) show that driving distance to the polling place and commuting conditions have a significant impact on turnout.

We build on previous studies and consider conditions that pose more adversities than miles and traffic jams. Physical separation from one's community heightens challenges for those who wish to participate in politics. This is especially the case for voters located in a country expe- riencing a major international or internal conflict. Conflict typically disrupts the delivery of mail, electricity, and other basic services—most notably those involving personal se- curity (Collier, 1999; Stewart, 2003). It impinges on freedom of the press, becomes a major focus of media attention, and reduces coverage of unrelated events, including US politics. UOCAVA voters in conflict-riddled nations probably encounter fewer Americans, participate in fewer discussions of an upcoming election, face more ob- stacles to learning about the candidates and issues, and have greater difficulty receiving or returning a traditional mail ballot. We anticipated these voters will have lower probabilities of voting than others. However, given that the EABDS alleviates inefficiencies of mail ballot delivery on the front end of the process, an effectively worded message might boost turnout and EABDS usage for those in nations experiencing conflict.

Next, we consider whether an overseas voter is situated in a country that shares an alliance with the US. Most US allies provide environments that should facilitate American citizens participating in political discussions and learning about US elections. In addition to providing for public safety and stability, most allies support the freedoms of speech, assembly, and other democratic norms. Their media also cover American politics. The same is not true of many nations with which the US does not share an alliance (Siverson and Emmons, 1991; Lai and Reiter, 2000). Thus, the surrounding environment should encourage UOCAVA voters in allied nations to be more receptive and responsive to an effectively-worded message, and it should have a positive impact on the turnout of UOCAVA voters and their propensity to use a new voting method.

Of course, there's no place like home, especially for encouraging voter turnout. Military voters stationed in the US and civilian overseas voters temporarily located in their US residence can choose from several voting options. They also are likely to be inundated by political advertisements and can readily converse with many about politics. One the one hand, we expect these individuals to be among the most likely UOCAVA voters to participate in an election. On the other, we anticipate few of them to request an elec- tronically-delivered absentee ballot or a federal write-in absentee ballot (FWAB) because of the availability of an array of domestic voting options, including in-person Election Day voting and early voting in many states.[7] Our expectations for UOCAVA voters are that those who receive a clear and concise message introducing the system that mentions their state and other reference groups will be the most likely to vote and use that system. Moreover, this message should have a greater impact on EABDS usage among UOCAVA voters abroad than those in the US.

Ultimately, it is important to assess the impact of email messages on the propensity of different groups to capitalize on the new technology. Given that the federal and state governments have invested substantial resources to make voting easier for specific groups of citizens, it would be useful learn how successful these messages are at inform- ing voters in different localities about a new voting option and getting them to use it. Since we have the most leverage over our experimental treatments we use the above con- siderations to focus our next two hypotheses on how the message and milieu interact.

**H3)**. Message, milieu, and turnout hypothesis: the mes- sage described in H1 is likely to promote greater turnout among US citizens in nations experiencing conflict (relative to those in non-conflict nations), in allied nations (relative to those in non-allied nations), and located abroad (relative to those located in the US).

**H4)**. Message, milieu, and conversion hypothesis: the message described in H1 is likely to promote greater use of the new voting method among US voters in nations expe- riencing conflict (relative to those in non-conflict nations),

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[7] The FWAB, often considered a voting option of last resort, is a downloadable ballot accepted by all states and territories that enables a voter to write-in the name of federal candidates only.

in allied nations (relative to those in non-allied nations), and located abroad (relative to those located in the US).

## 3. Data and research methods

We test our hypotheses using a field experiment that collected data from UOCAVA voters registered to vote in Maryland. Our sample, which differs from those used in most other voter mobilization studies, is appropriate for assessing the impact of communications on military and overseas voters—a population that differs substantially from the general public in at least three important respects. First, and most obvious, the voters in our study are overseas civilians or are members of the military who are stationed abroad or domestically. Second, they demonstrated an interest in voting by voluntarily signing up for information on a website sponsored by the Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF)—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).[8] Third, they are registered voters of Maryland, which, as noted above, implemented an internet-based ballot delivery system prior to the 2010 election. We recognize there are important differences between military personnel and civilians, But there are many similarities too, e.g. both sets have relocated, rarely get to vote in the US community where they would normally vote, and traditional election day voting in that community is generally not an option. Moreover, both are included in the relevant legislation and subsequent label, UOCAVA voter, used to describe these citizens. As such we combine them for analysis.[9]

Maryland is an appropriate state for conducting this study for several additional reasons. It has a mid-sized population, a professional state government, and its electoral competitiveness is similar to that of many states.[10] The state's military and overseas voting-age population was estimated to number at least 77,000 in 2008 (McDonald, 2009).[11] UOCAVA voters from Maryland are drawn from the ranks of the military, the diplomatic corps, private industry, and university students, among other segments of society. As noted above, Maryland's EABDS is easy to use

and was implemented in time for the 2010 election. By assessing the impact of email communications during the voting system's initial deployment, our design avoided history as a threat to internal validity. Finally, the EABDS was widely used. It accounted for 36.9% of the 10,693 absentee ballots distributed to UOCAVA voters from Maryland in the 2010 general election, and 41.6% of the 2711 ballots they returned. Traditional mail ballots accounted for 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 OVF's mailing list. OVF is a trusted source of information among UOCAVA voters, and its list includes only members who volunteered their email addresses. Thus, we know that those who participated in our study had at least some interest in voting and were unlikely to ignore or delete the email due to fear it contained harmful information. In 2010, OVF sent a total of 11 emails to the 1374 Maryland voters on its email list. We randomly assigned each of these voters to one of four groups. Three of the groups received email messages containing detailed information about the new system. We have good balance across each group on key characteristics, suggesting the randomization worked well (see Appendix Table 1).

Although our sample is relatively small and lacks the statistical power of those used in some other studies of the impact of communications on voting, it is extremely well-suited to our purpose, which is to test hypotheses about the influence of election communications on the turnout and voting system usage of an important population of potential voters. Recall that UOCAVA voters have expressed interest in voting, are located in drastically different geographic and social environments, and must overcome formidable obstacles to cast a ballot. This may limit the inferences we can draw to the nonvoters in other samples, but it enables us to generalize about a group that is sufficiently large to influence the outcome of an election and is symbolically important enough to have inspired the passage and implementation of reforms at the federal and state levels.

The first dependent variable, voter turnout, is a dichotomous measure of whether a voter cast a ballot in the 2010 general election. The second dependent variable is the voting option used: the EABDS; a mail absentee ballot; an FWAB; or a domestic in-person voting. Abstention from voting is the comparison category.

### 3.1. Messages used in the study

Our first set of independent variables of major interest is the email communications that were randomly sent to voters. We were able to vary two important features of the emails: the subject heading and the content in the body of the message (see Table 1; the full messages appear in the Supplemental Online Appendix). The first group received the *State policy innovation* (SPI) message, which had the shortest subject line and highlighted the state and its new policy. The subject heading was: "Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters." The top of the email contained a policy alert that presented similar information.

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[8] Since 2006 OVF has maintained a mailing list and emailed messages to inform voters of important changes in voting laws and the organization's activities on their behalf.

[9] Unfortunately, our measure of military membership is limited, as is the number of participants we can confirm are in the military. We do not have enough cases to analyze military members separately but when we exclude those known to be in the military the substantive conclusions do not change.

[10] Maryland, often described as "America in miniature" (Smith and Willis, 2012), is somewhat more racially, geographically, and economically diverse than most states. Its population is more educated and affluent than the national averages. Its politics are typical of most states in that it has been historically dominated by one-party (the Democrats), but reasonable two-party competition is evident as the minority party (the Republicans) has recently run competitive races for governor and occupied the governor's mansion. The 2010 gubernatorial election was a rematch between an incumbent Democratic and the Republican he defeated in the previous contest.

[11] FVAP (2009) estimated the number to have been closer to 100,000.

**Table 1**
Percentage of OVF list members by message.

| Group | Subject line and policy alert | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Group 1 (SPI) | Subject: Maryland's New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Alert: New Internet-delivered absentee ballot, outreach to overseas voters | 24.2% |
| Group 2 (NPI) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: New Policy Reaches Out to Overseas Voters<br>Policy Alert: New Internet-delivered absentee ballot, outreach to overseas voters | 25.2 |
| Group 3 (NSO) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Alert: New Internet-delivered absentee ballot | 25.8 |
| Group 4 (Control) | Subject: Overseas Vote Foundation: Maryland Voter Alert<br>Policy Alert: None | 24.9 |

Notes: Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the four groups with an equal likelihood of being in each group. The slight variation in the percentage in each group is due to small variation in our ability to locate cases in the Maryland Voter File. As indicated in note 9, the rate of matching was not significantly different across groups.

By leading with the name of the state, the email's subject heading should enhance the message's credibility; some voters might even have thought the message came from an official state source. Mention of the recipient's reference groups (Marylanders and overseas voters) was intended to create a personal connection. The brief discussion of the policy innovation was intended to arouse interest and encourage use of the new system. We anticipate this message should boost voter turnout and EABDS usage more than any other message overall and across the contexts we described earlier.

The second group received the *Nonprofit policy innovation* (NPI) message, which was nearly identical to the SPI message. Its only difference was the subject line was longer and began with superfluous language (OVF's name, which occupied nearly the first 40% of the space). We anticipated that the lengthy subject line would distract some recipients from reading its most important part. Moreover, some recipients would be unable to read the section introducing the new voting systems because many email systems truncate long subject lines. Thus, we expect this message to be less likely to lead voters to open the email and, as a result, have less of an impact on voter turnout or EABDS usage.

The third group, referred to as the *Nonprofit standard outreach* (NSO) group, received OVF's standard 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 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 NSO message except that it had no policy alert. Some information about the new voting method was included, but it was presented indirectly at the end of the message as a part of the instructions for obtaining a ballot. We expected members of this group would be the least likely to vote or use the EABDs. Although we exercised complete control over the email subject lines and messages, consistent with its mission of providing information on elections to all its members, OVF did not wish to assign a traditional control group that received no contact. Despite lacking the traditional control group associated with most experiments, our design offers some advantages in studying the population of interest. Members of the control group are to some extent representative of other voters who have signed on to a political email list in that both are almost certain to receive an email, tweet, or some other communication from the list's sponsoring organization. Messages sent over a political listserve primarily focus on a candidate or ballot issue; they address voting options as a secondary matter—as was the case with the message we distributed to the control group. A final methodological advantage is that because everyone received some information about the election, our test of the effects of email communications on turnout and EABDS usage are conservative. In other words, this feature makes it harder for us to find an effect for the SPI or other treatments.

We sent each respondent their respective email message on the same date, August 30, 2010. The emails were sent using the *Vertical Response* mailing system, which tracks open rates, bounces, and unsubscribe requests. This system allowed us to determine both whether the individual received or opened the message that was sent. The Maryland State Board of Elections provided data that recorded whether an individual voted in the 2010 general election, the method used to cast a ballot, and the individuals' age and voting history. OVF provided information about the location of the voter's residence.[12] We used the information about location to code voters as residing in a conflict zone (Gleditch et al., 2004; Themnér and Wallensteen, 2011), a country that shared an alliance with the US (Gibler, 2009), or in the US itself during the 2010 election. We assess the impact of email communications and milieu on voter turnout and EABDS usage using differences of means tests.

## 4. Results

Our first set of preliminary results show the independent influences of the messages and milieu (see Fig. 1). Overall, we find that those who received the SPI message voted at higher rates than those who received the other messages (24.2% vs. 20.9%), but since this difference is not statistically significant we view this result with caution. The impact of milieu was generally in the direction we anticipated but some of the differences were not

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[12] There were 179 individuals on OVF's list that were not in the state's voter file; as a result, we exclude these cases from the analyses. It may be that some on the list changed their registration to another state or signed on to the list to acquire information about the voting process in order to pass information to others. Treating the unmatched cases as nonvoters did not have a substantive effect on the results, and a multinomial logit model indicates that finding a match is not a statistically significant predictor of treatment assignment.
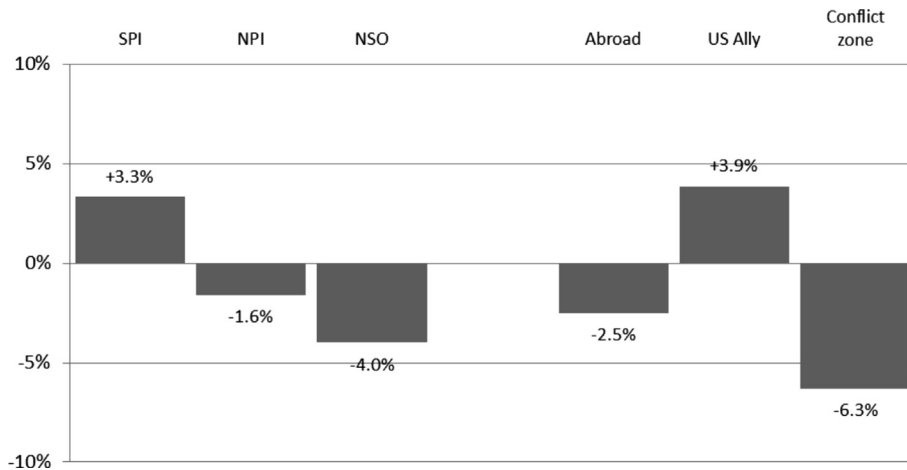
**Fig. 1.** The impact of email message and milieu on voter turnout.

statistically significant. Turnout among citizens located in the US was 2.5 percentage points higher than those located abroad but the difference was not statistically significant. Among overseas citizens in allied countries turnout was 4 percentage points greater (p < 0.08) than that for overseas citizens in non-allied countries.[13] Additionally, turnout among voters in nations experiencing conflict was substantially lower than those in countries at peace (a 6 percentage point difference, p < 0.025).

Our second set of preliminary results is for the impact of different treatments and milieus on the voting method used. In theory, five options were available to UOCAVA voters. Approximately 8.7% of these individuals participated using an in-person voting method, either traditional Election Day voting or early voting. This was followed by EABDS users, who constituted 6.5% of those who voted. This is a large group considering that 2010 was the first time the system was available. Mail absentee ballots were somewhat less popular, comprising only 3.3%, perhaps because of the drawbacks raised earlier. The FWAB, the voting method of last resort because it only allows voters to participate in elections for federal office, was used by less than 1.8% of UOCAVA voters.[14] Finally, almost four of five individuals abstained from voting, substantially fewer than the 96% national average for UOCAVA voters.[15]

The results presented in Fig. 2 show how the method used to vote varied across treatments and milieu. These results strongly support our expectations regarding the impact of email communications on voting behavior. Individuals who received the SPI message were 5 percentage points more likely to use the EABDS than those who received the control message (p < 0.02). The other two

messages had virtually no impact. None of the messages had a positive impact on voting with either the traditional mail absentee ballot or in-person, but the negative effects associated with the NPI and NSO messages are somewhat surprising. They suggest that some voters ignored these messages, probably because of the similarity of their subject lines and content to the other emails received from OVF. The findings for the FWAB reinforce that email communications had little impact on a voter's decision to use this method.

The results for milieu corroborate many of our expectations. Voters located in allied countries make greater use of the EABDS than those in non-allied countries (p < 0.02), but location in an allied country has no significant impact on voting using a mail absentee ballot, an FWAB, or in person. Voters in nations experiencing a conflict are somewhat less likely to use the new voting method than a mail absentee ballot or FWAB. Voters abroad are substantially less likely to vote in person than those located in the US on Election Day (mostly members of the military). Overseas voters also appear significantly more likely to use the EABDS than domestic UOACAVA voters—most of whom chose to vote in person. Nevertheless, this finding needs to be interpreted with caution because few domestic voters on OVF's list used the new system.

Given the preceding results and the substantial investments the federal and state governments have made to introduce voting methods that make voting easier for UOCAVA voters, it is important to examine the impact of the SPI message on voters in different milieus. The results of our hypothesis test for the effect of the SPI message on turnout across contexts are presented in Fig. 3. It shows the impact of the SPI message on voter turnout compared to the impact of the control message. The most striking result is that the SPI had a large impact on the turnout rate of those located in nations experiencing conflict. Whereas turnout among those in such nations who were part of the control group was just 11.3%, turnout among SPI message recipients in conflict areas was 23.9%, a difference of over 12 percentage points (p < 0.05). By contrast, the SPI

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[13] Given that we have expectations regarding the direction of the differences we use 1-tailed tests throughout the study.

[14] As explained in note 5, the FWAB is a downloadable ballot accepted by all US states and territories.

[15] The national average is calculated using the estimated UOCAVA voting eligible population figures from McDonald (2009) and a figure for the total ballots cast from the US Election Assistance Commission (2009).
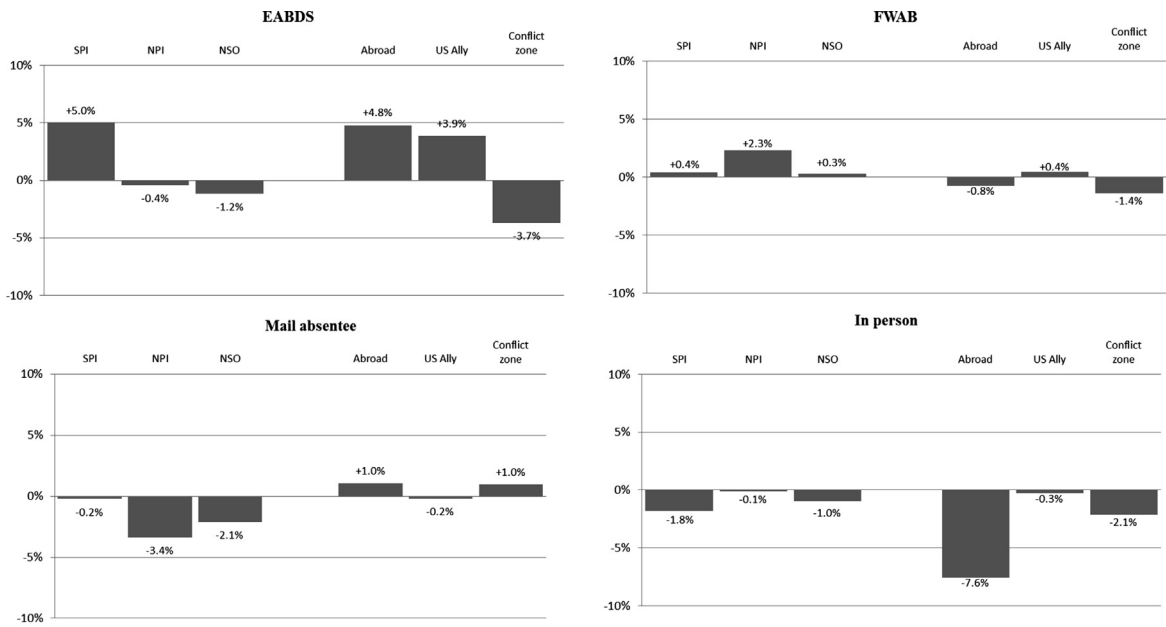
Note: For the message variables (in the first three columns) the comparison group is the control message group. For voters abroad, in US allied countries, and conflict zone nations, the respective comparison groups are voters in the US, non-allied countries, and non-conflict zones.

**Fig. 2.** The impact of email messages and milieu on EABDS usage.

message had a substantively small and statistically insignificant impact in countries not experiencing conflict. The difference between the effects in conflict and non-conflict zones also was substantively large and statistically significant (p < 0.08). The figure suggests that the SPI message had a more positive impact on those in the US than those abroad, but each of the effects were statistically insignificant, as was the difference in the differences. The
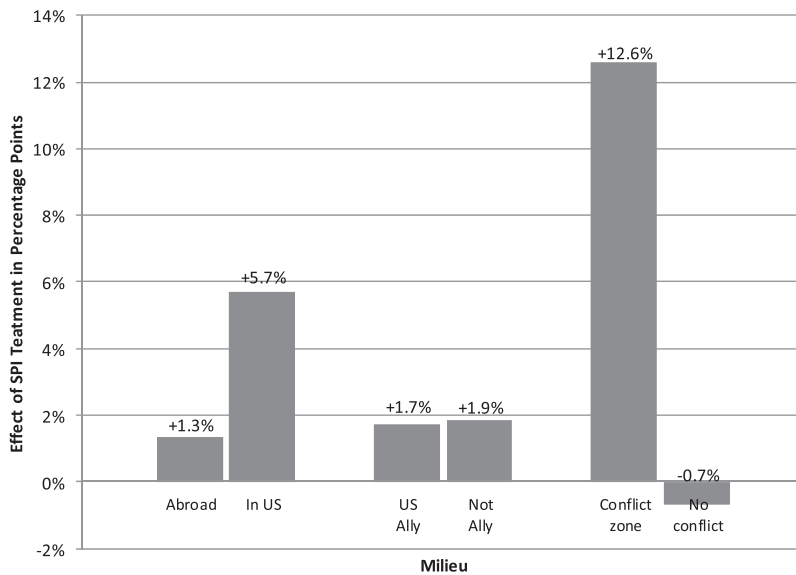


Note: Each bar shows the difference in the turnout rate between those who received the SPI message compared to those who received the control message.

**Fig. 3.** The impact of the State targeted policy innovation message (SPI) on the average turnout in different milieus.
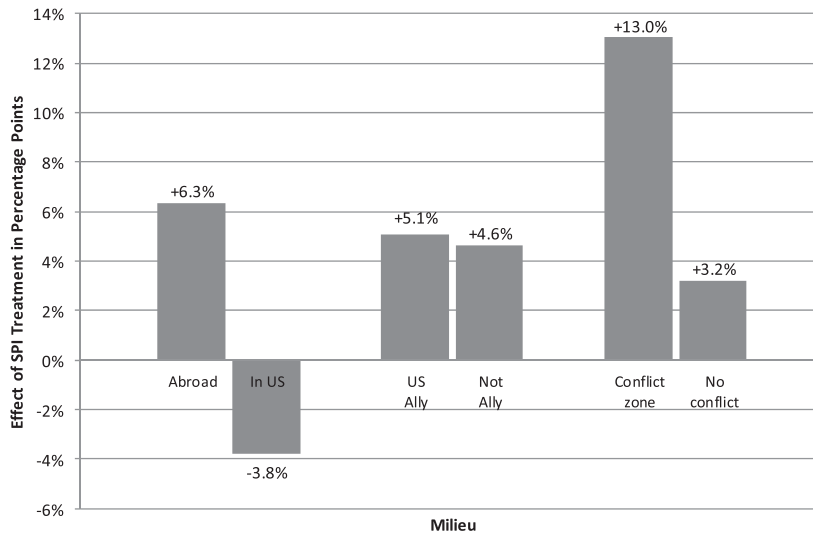
Note: Each bar shows the difference in the EABDS usage rate (including nonvoters) between those who received the SPI message compared to those who received the control message.

**Fig. 4.** The impact of the State targeted policy innovation message (SPI) on the average EABDS usage in different milieus.

SPI message had virtually identical effects on turnout for those in allied or non-allied nations, with none of the differences achieving statistical significance. For the most part, these results are consistent with the literature showing the difficulty of increasing turnout via subtle email messages. However, the results for UOCAVA voters in countries experiencing conflict suggest that under some circumstances the content of the message potential voters receive can boost turnout.

The results in Fig. 4 compare the effects of the SPI message and control message on EABDS usage. Not surprisingly, the SPI message had pronounced effects on voters residing abroad. Usage rates among those who received the SPI message were more than 6 percentage points higher than those in the control ($p < 0.01$). For those residing in the US, the SPI treatment did not have a positive effect and was not statistically significant. It is noteworthy that the large difference between the effects of the message on voters abroad and those in the US was statistically significant ($p < 0.09$). The SPI treatment had similar effects on EABDS usage for those in allied and non-allied nations: the 5.1 percentage point effect in allied nations is statistically significant at $p < 0.05$, the 4.6 point effect in non-allied nations is significant ($p < 0.09$), and the difference between the treatment effects for the two groups was neither substantively nor statistically significant. Similar to the result for turnout, the SPI treatment had a larger impact on voters located in conflict-riddled countries than those at peace. The 13 percentage point boost in EABDS usage among those receiving the SPI treatment is substantively large relative to the overall 7% EABDS usage rate across the sample and is also statistically significant ($p < 0.01$); but the smaller 3.2 point effect for those in nations not experiencing conflict is not statistically significant. The difference between these

two effects is both substantively large and statistically significant ($p < 0.06$). Overall, the SPI message was effective in increasing usage of the new voting method with particularly strong results for registrants residing in nations experiencing conflict.

## 5. Conclusion

This study presents a number of important and unique findings. First, it shows some voters are willing to use a new electronic absentee ballot delivery system. Second, it demonstrates that an impersonal email communication can boost system usage and turnout when it is designed to appeal to an electorally-motivated segment of the population that confronts a number of structural challenges to voting. Third, it extends generalizations about the impact of geography and social setting on political behavior to encompass a broader set of environmental circumstances.

The accessibility, usability, and efficiencies associated with the voting system constitute one plausible explanation for our results. After all, potential voters are unlikely to use a system that provides few conveniences and is burdensome to use. Nonetheless, we demonstrate there are explanations beyond technology. We show that raising citizen awareness through an effectively-worded email communication can increase usage of a new voting method. A clear concise message that has source credibility, primes recipients to think about their reference groups, and arouses interest is likely to succeed where other messages fail. We also demonstrate the importance of situational dynamics. The milieu in which citizens find themselves influences the political information they receive, their conversations about politics, and their motivations and opportunities to participate in an election. It affects the

choices they make about using a new voting system and voting in general. Milieu also has a conditioning effect on the influence of email communications.

Another set of explanations concerns the design of our study. The selection of UOCAVA voters using OVF's mail list as the study population is important because these individuals have expressed at least a modicum of interest in voting. Although OVF's requirement that all participants, including the control group, receive some form of election-related email message almost certainly biased the results in a conservative direction, it added a degree of realism to the study.

These findings suggest there are opportunities for further research. Future studies should test additional messages. It may be that messages that are tailored to appeal to voters in different overseas locations are more effective than a general message. In addition, the statistical power of the findings could be improved by increasing the sample size, perhaps by including states that adopt similar voting methods. Others may wish to replicate this study in other countries when measures taken to address the special needs of overseas voters are implemented. Future studies should also investigate the theoretical and empirical issues relating to military personnel overall and in comparison to civilians overseas.

The findings also have important implications for political practitioners, election administrators, and others concerned with voter mobilization. They suggest it is worthwhile to use email to contact overseas voters, including those who expect to be abroad on Election Day, and especially those who anticipate being located in countries experiencing conflict. Given the greater efficiencies and reduced costs associated with internet-based ballot delivery systems, states that currently use these systems should consider investing more to publicize them and trying to develop more effective messages. States and countries that do not, should consider implementing such a system–message combination. The findings also imply there might be benefits to making this system available to all voters, including US citizens not covered by the UOCAVA or MOVE Act. Internet-based ballot delivery systems would probably have particular appeal to younger voters, who make greater use of email than traditional mail. These systems also might appeal to senior citizens or voters with disabilities because the systems provide an option to vote with an absentee ballot in private and at their convenience. For many, the current alternative is voting when absentee ballots arrive at an assisted care facility *en masse* and caretakers may attempt to become involved in the voting process. Further, given the increased competitiveness of many elections and the availability of micro-targeting techniques, it may behoove candidates, political parties, and advocacy groups to consider expanding the use of email and other social media as a voter mobilization tool.

Regardless of these implications and possibilities, our study demonstrates that informing voters about innovations in election technology in an effective manner has the potential to enhance participation in elections. The perceptions of future generations about the conveniences and risks of various voting methods undoubtedly will differ from those of contemporary voters. It is likely that in the not so distant future, voters will become more comfortable with and reliant on ballots downloaded from the Internet than ballots delivered through the mail or cast at traditional polling places. The introduction of new voting systems and communication methods has the potential to change the dynamics of voter mobilization in a global world.

**Appendix Table 1**
Balance across conditions on key variables.

|  | SPI | NPI | NSO | Control |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Turnout % 2008 | 70% | 65% | 67% | 67% |
| Age | 45 | 44 | 44 | 46 |
| % Female | 53% | 54% | 56% | 50% |
| % Abroad | 87% | 89% | 89% | 89% |
| % in Allied nation | 74% | 70% | 78% | 73% |
| % in Conflict zone | 17% | 19% | 15% | 19% |

Notes: All differences for all comparisons are statistically insignificant at $p > 0.10$ (2 tailed) except for the age differences between NSO and the control ($p = 0.069$) and the % in allied nations between NPI and NSO ($p = 0.033$). A multinomial logit using these factors to predict treatment assignment indicates that individually and overall these factors are not good predictors of treatment assignment ((LR test: $\chi 2 = 13.87$ (18 d.f.) $p = 0.737$). Complete results including predicted probabilities using the observed value approach (Hanmer and Kalkan, 2013) are available upon request.

**Appendix Table 2**
Comparison of effects of SPI treatment relative to NPI treatment on turnout and EABDS usage, by milieu.

|  | Effect of SPI treatment relative to NPI treatment | p Value (1 tailed) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Voter turnout** | | |
| Overall | 0.049 | 0.073 |
| Abroad | 0.063 | 0.045 |
| US | 0.050 | 0.322 |
| Ally | 0.063 | 0.067 |
| Non-ally | 0.053 | 0.200 |
| Conflict | 0.121 | 0.060 |
| Non-conflict | 0.048 | 0.109 |
| **EABDS usage** | | |
| Overall | 0.054 | 0.008 |
| Abroad | 0.065 | 0.007 |
| US | 0.029 | 0.184 |
| Ally | 0.066 | 0.012 |
| Non-ally | 0.035 | 0.174 |
| Conflict | 0.111 | 0.018 |
| Non-conflict | 0.048 | 0.036 |

Note: None of the differences in effects across milieu categories are statistically significant at conventional levels.

## Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.04.002.

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