

How to Communicate with Your Elected Officials

Voter Assistance

The *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)* covers the voting rights of members of the Uniformed Services (on active duty), members of the Merchant Marine, their eligible family members, and U. S. citizens residing outside the U. S. The Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) carries out the responsibilities of this Act by providing these citizens with guidance about participating in the democratic process regardless of their location in the world.

To apply for an absentee ballot, citizens covered under the UOCAVA submit the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), SF-76. The FPCA is the form used to simultaneously request registration and/or an absentee ballot from the local election official of the citizen's legal voting residence. Some states allow the electronic transmission (faxing) of the FPCA, the blank ballot and/or the voted ballot. The law in each state and territory determines the method of transmission of election materials allowed. State-by-state instructions can be found in the Voting Assistance Guide on the FVAP's World Wide Web site (www.fvap.gov) under FVAP Publications.

WORLD WIDE WEB

Many of the FVAP's educational and training materials are available at www.fvap.gov, as well as links to the Executive Branch, U. S. Congress, state and local governments and worldwide organizations and corporations.

OMBUDSMAN SERVICE

The FVAP provides an "Ombudsman Service" for voters, voting assistance officers and local election officials to resolve problems which cannot be solved locally or to answer questions concerning procedures for registration and ballot request, including timely receipt of ballots. For assistance, contact the FVAP. Contact information for FVAP is available on <http://www.fvap.gov>. There are toll free telephone numbers from 64 countries. Email (vote@fvap.ncr.gov) is proving to be the most efficient avenue of communication.

VOTING INFORMATION CENTER (VIC)

The DoD Voting Information Center (VIC) is an automated telephone system which contains election information and allows direct access to incumbent members of the U. S. Senate, the U. S. House of Representatives, State Governors and State Chief Election Officials. Prior to an election, messages from candidates for Federal offices and State

Governors are also available. Unit Voting Assistance Officers, individual members of the Uniformed Services and citizens residing outside the United States may also connect directly with their Service or State Department Voting Action Officer for assistance in receiving materials for service-specific absentee voting information. Contact information for FVAP is available on [../index.html](#). There are toll free telephone numbers from 64 countries. Email (vote@fvap.ncr.gov) is proving to be the most efficient avenue of communication.

HOW TO OBTAIN INFORMATION ON CANDIDATES AND ISSUES

In addition to the VIC, representatives of the Democratic and Republican Parties overseas are available to assist American citizens to register and vote absentee. They maintain web sites that provide information about candidates and the addresses of local party representatives in the United States. Assistance is also available from U. S. Embassies and Consulates. Additional candidate and issue information is available on the Internet.

Democrats Abroad

430 S. Capitol Street, S.E.

Washington, DC 20003

World Wide Web: <http://www.democratsabroad.org>

Email: demsabroad@dnc.org.

Fax: (202) 863-8063 Phone: (202) 863-8103

Republicans Abroad International

209 Pennsylvania Avenue, S.E.

Washington, DC 20003

World Wide Web: <http://www.republicansabroad.org>

Email: republicansai@mindspring.com

Fax: (202) 608-1431 Phone: (202) 608-1423

The Legislative Process

1. A bill is written. A Senator or Representative may develop original legislation, or an association or private citizens may request that a bill be prepared and assist in its writing.
2. A bill is introduced in the Senate and/or House. It is assigned a number (S.- in the Senate and H. R.- in the House). Its title and sponsors are published in the Congressional Record.
3. The Parliamentarians of the House and Senate assign bills to committees with the appropriate jurisdiction. The chair of the committee assigns the bill to the subcommittee with the most appropriate jurisdiction.
4. The subcommittee may hold hearings on the bill and invite testimony from public and private witnesses. Individuals may make their views known by testifying, by providing a written statement, or by allowing interest groups to represent them.
5. Once the hearings are completed, the subcommittee may meet to "mark-up" the bill- to consider amendments. It then votes on whether to report the bill favorably to the full committee. If not favorably reported, the bill dies.
6. The full committee may repeat any or all of the subcommittee's actions: hearings, mark-up, and vote. If the committee votes favorably on the bill, it is ordered reported to the full Chamber (House of Representatives or Senate).
7. When the bill reaches the floor of the House or Senate, the membership of the entire body can debate it. The bill may be amended, referred back to committee, or voted up or down.
8. If the Bill is passed by the House or Senate, it is referred to the other body. A House-passed bill may be placed directly on the Senate Calendar, bypassing the subcommittees and committee reviews. Usually, however, the subcommittees and committees in both bodies have an opportunity to hold hearings, debate, and amend legislative proposals. Related or identical legislation often proceeds through the House and Senate simultaneously.
9. If a bill is passed in identical form by the House and Senate, it can be immediately delivered to the President.
10. If there are significant differences between the House and Senate versions of the bill, each chamber appoints an ad hoc conference committee to resolve the differences. Conference committees are composed of Senators and Representatives on the committees which originally considered the legislation.
11. If the conferees are unable to reach agreement, the legislation dies. If they reach

agreement, the bill is sent back to both the House and Senate. Both must approve the revised bill.

12. The bill then goes to the President for his signature. He has four options:

(1) if he signs the bill, it becomes law;

(2) if he takes no action within ten days while Congress is in session, the bill becomes law;

(3) if he takes no action while Congress is adjourned at the end of the second session, the bill is "pocket vetoed" and dies; or,

(4) the President may veto the bill.

13. If the President vetoes a bill, Congress may attempt to "override the veto." This requires a two-thirds vote by both the House and Senate. If either fails to get a two-thirds vote, the bill dies.

Key Election Terms

Affidavit - sworn statement in writing, usually made under oath or affirmation, before an authorized officer, notary, or court official.

Attest - to witness the signing of a document.

Ballot - a device on which a voter marks his/her choice.

Congressional District - division of a state, based on population, electing one member to the U. S. House of Representatives.

Constituents - citizens represented by the official they elect.

Domicile (Voting Residence) - place where a person has a true, fixed, and permanent home or ties, and to which, whenever absent, has the intention of returning. It is the address that generally ties the voter to the precinct in which the voter intends to vote.

Electoral Vote - votes cast for President and Vice President by presidential electors. When a citizen votes for a presidential candidate, the ballot is cast for the group of presidential electors associated with that candidate in that state.

Elector - a qualified voter. Also used for the 538 members of the Electoral College.

Federal Ballot - ballot listing only candidates for Federal offices.

Federal Post Card Application (SF- 76) - simultaneous registration and/or absentee ballot request used by U. S. citizens voting pursuant to the UOCAVA.

Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot (SF- 186) - special ballot which enables citizens to write in their choices for candidates for Federal offices under certain circumstances.

General Election - election held to choose among previously nominated candidates for Federal, state and local offices.

Majority - a number greater than half of the total votes cast.

Municipal Election - election held in a city or town to vote for local officials or on questions of local interest.

Plurality - the difference in the number of votes cast for the two candidates receiving the most votes.

Popular Vote - number of votes cast by the people, as distinguished from the electoral vote.

Primary Election - election held to nominate a political party's candidates for the general election.

Closed Primary - primary in which voters must declare their political party affiliation and choose a candidate from that party's ballot.

Open Primary - primary in which voters may vote for the candidates of any party listed on the ballot.

Runoff - election held in some states if no candidate receives a specified percentage of the vote in the general election.

Voting Residence - voter's domicile, generally. However, the voting residence of a U. S. citizen voting pursuant to the UOCAVA and no longer domiciled in the U. S. will be the place in which he/she was last domiciled immediately prior to departing the U. S.

Write-in - method of voting for a person whose name is not on the ballot. Federal and state write-in absentee ballots may be available. See your Voting Assistance Officer for details.

Federal Elections and Officials

Of nearly 500,000 elected officials in the U.S., only 542 are Federal officials-1 President, 1 Vice President, 100 U.S. Senators (two from each state), 435 U.S. Representatives, four Delegates to the House of Representatives from U.S. territories and the District of Columbia, and one Resident Commissioner from the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico.

Elections for Federal offices are held on the first Tuesday after the first Monday in November of even-numbered years. The election for President and Vice President is conducted every four years.

Senators serve six-year terms, with one-third of them up for election every even-numbered year. Senators are chosen in statewide elections and represent all citizens of their state.

Elections for Representatives and Delegates are conducted every even-numbered year. U.S. Representatives are elected by the voters of the district they represent. Only one Representative (the Congressman or Congresswoman from your state congressional district) represents you in the House of Representatives.

Most state congressional districts have about 550,000 residents, but some states with smaller populations each have a single Representative (at-large) who represents the entire state.

The powers and responsibilities of elected Federal officials are defined in the Constitution. In general, elected Federal officials deal with matters and enact policies that affect the whole nation. For example, elected Federal officials formulate national security policy and regulate international trade. They also deal with certain local or personal issues where the Federal Government is involved, such as veterans benefits.

To find out who your U.S. Representative is, check the FVAP web site at www.fvap.gov/comm/communicating.html or call the U.S. Capitol Switchboard at (202) 224-3121 and give the operator your ZIP Code. The operator can also connect the call to a congressional office or committee.

CONGRESSIONAL OFFICES

Each Member of Congress has two types of offices:

Contact the Washington, DC office regarding legislative matters or concerns and constituent services.

The Representative's district office or Senator's state offices assist with personal matters (i.e., Social Security payments, IRS actions, small business loans, disaster relief, etc.).

CONGRESSIONAL STAFF

Administrative Assistant (A. A.)/ Chief of Staff - supervises daily office activities, monitors state/ district sentiment on various issues, maintains liaison with the state/district officials, and often manages the re- election campaign.

Legislative Assistant (L. A.) - one or more per office, performs background research, monitors legislative proposals, makes recommendation to the Member regarding the merit of any particular bill (pros and cons).

Press Secretary - maintains and cultivates public image for the Member of Congress through the media.

Appointments Secretary - manages the Member's schedule.

Caseworker - resolves individual constituent's problems with the Federal Government.

Receptionist - greets visitors, answers the telephone, controls traffic flow in the office.

State and Local Elections and Officials

STATE OFFICIALS

All states hold statewide elections for key state officials. These include, for most states, the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Secretary of State, and Attorney General. In many states, there are other officials who are elected in statewide elections, such as State Supreme Court Justices, Comptroller, and Treasurer.

State elected officials also include State Senators and State Legislators. These officials are elected by the voters of the districts they serve. The terms of state officials vary by state, but the typical term of a governor is two or four years. State legislators typically serve two-year terms.

Elected state officials deal largely with statewide issues such as the level of taxation, education, transportation, and social services.

Many states hold referenda to submit legislative matters to the voters for approval or rejection. Other matters that may appear on state ballots include bond initiatives, amendments to the state constitution and recalls of state elected officials.

LOCAL ELECTIONS AND OFFICIALS

Local officials include mayor, town or city council members, county commissioner, county sheriff, township supervisor, school board member and many others, from city dogcatcher to county coroner. The number and titles of elected local officials vary from locality to locality and from state to state.

Local officials make up the vast majority of elected officials in the U.S. Among their major areas of responsibility are public education, maintenance of city streets and county roads, local sanitation facilities, police and public safety, zoning, and local parks and recreation.

Tips for Telephoning Your Senator or Congressperson

Regarding Legislative Matters

1. Determine your objective in advance. Do you intend to only give your opinion, or do you want to discuss a matter with someone? Most offices keep tally sheets on "hot" legislative issues so you can call and simply register your opinion on a given matter.
2. Call the Washington, DC office of your Senator or Representative or his/her local state/district office.
3. State your name and city or town of residence.
4. If you have requested a document, etc., some Congressional offices will ask that you also send the request in writing. Congressional offices often take 2-4 weeks to reply.
5. The [DoD Voting Information Center](#) also provides a direct connection to these officials.

Regarding Non-Legislative Matters

1. Call the Washington, DC office of your Senator or Congressman or his/her local state/district office.
 2. State your name and city or town of residence.
 3. Identify your problem or need, (i. e., Social Security payments, IRS matters, or any other questions dealing with Federal departments or agencies).
 4. Some Congressional offices will request a follow-up in writing.
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Tips For Writing To Your Elected Officials

Guidelines for Composing Your Letter

1. Address the letter to the Representative or Senator(s) who represents you in Congress.
2. Immediately identify the subject. If it concerns a specific bill, identify it by name and number (S.-" Senate Bill"/ H. R.-" House Bill"). Limit the letter to one topic.
3. Tell the Senator or Representative why you are advocating this position. State facts and give examples. Explain how the legislation may affect you and your company, group, etc. Do not generalize. Be specific.
4. The letter should be polite, positive and constructive, never threatening.
5. In closing, restate the purpose of the letter. Thank the Senator or Representative for his/her consideration.

Checklist

- Include your local address on the letter.
- Limit the letter to one page, two at most.
- Type the letter or write neatly.
- Type/print your name below your signature.
- Do not send a photocopy.

Sample Letter

The Honorable John Doe
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Doe:

I am writing you to (support/oppose) (S.-) . . .

I urge you to (support/ oppose) (S.-) because . . . In conclusion, I urge you to . . .

Sincerely,
John Q. Public

Forms of Address

U.S. Senate

The Honorable ...
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Salutation: Dear Senator:

U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable ...
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Salutation: Dear Representative:

Email

Many congressional offices respond electronically to Email comments and inquiries. However, because some offices prefer to respond to citizens by mail, it is recommended that you always include your mailing address.

Faxing

Check the U.S. Senate and/or U.S. House of Representatives web sites for fax numbers.

Recommended faxing procedures:

- Call to inform the office of the incoming fax.
 - Fax to the attention of the appropriate staff member.
 - Use a cover sheet to identify the sender and intended recipient.
 - Mail original copy of previously faxed material.
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