# DATA STANDARDIZATION AND THE 2020 GENERAL ELECTION

ESB Data Standard shows the importance of UOCAVA and the MOVE Act in allowing voters to complete the voting process in time during a challenging year.

The collection of transactional data is an innovative way to obtain information about the voting process and the impact of Congressional reforms like the *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act* (*UOCAVA*) and the *Military and Overseas Voting Empowerment* (*MOVE*) *Act* that protect the voting rights of military members, their families, and overseas citizens. This research note uses 2020 data from the ESB Data Standard to detail the voting process for the *UOCAVA* population and shows the importance of *UOCAVA* and the *MOVE Act* in the voting process.

Background and Methods. Since 2015, the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) has been working with The Council of State Governments (CSG) Overseas Voting Initiative (OVI) to develop a standardized format that captures transactional-level data about military and overseas voters in the Election Administration and Voting Survey Section B (ESB) Data Standard. The transactional nature of the data and the availability of dates on which each transaction is recorded by the election office provides a reliable snapshot of how and when *UOCAVA* voters complete the steps of the voting process. It also allows exploration of the impact that requirements from the *MOVE Act*, such as the mandate that ballots are sent no later than 45 days before the election (given the voter requested their ballot before that date), have on voting outcomes. For the 2020 general election, twelve states and seven jurisdictions reported transactional data for ESB, and their data accounted for about 40% of the total *UOCAVA* population in the United States.

Results. States and jurisdictions reporting ESB data had 67% of the transmitted ballots returned by the voters. The ballot return rate varied depending on when the ballot was initially requested. Ballots had the highest return rates when requested during the election year and before the 45-day deadline set by the *MOVE Act* for states to send the blank ballots to voters. For ballots requested in 2020, the return rate decreased as the ballots were requested closer to Election Day, with ballots requested before the 45-day deadline having the highest return rate (76%), and those requested in the two weeks before the election having the lowest return rate (55%).

Figure 1. Ballots Requested in the Election Year Had Higher Return Rates Than Ballots Requested in Previous Years
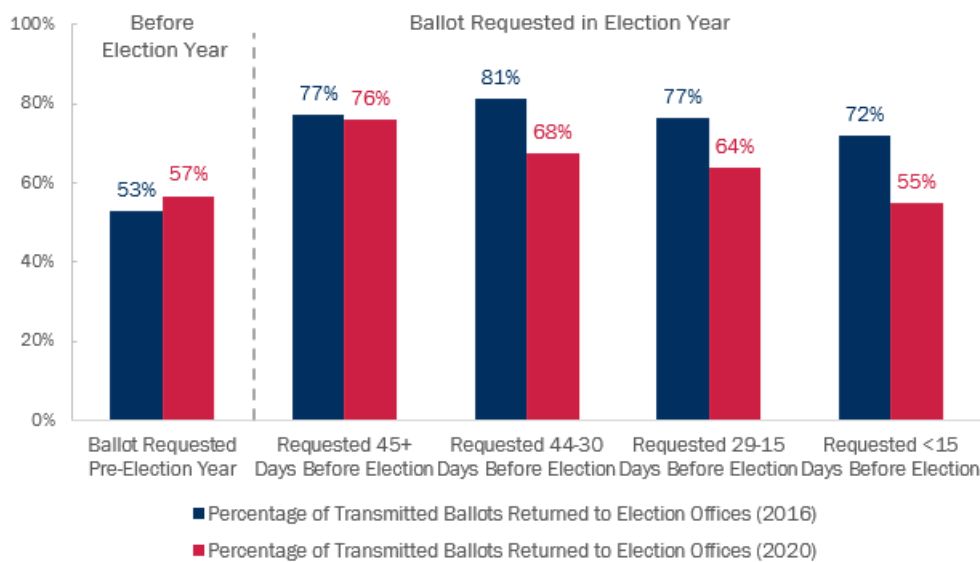
Figure 1 shows that return rates for the 2016 and 2020 general elections were similar for ballots requested before the 45-day deadline; however, for ballots requested past the 45-day deadline, the return rates were considerably lower in 2020 compared to 2016. A potential explanation for this discrepancy is the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on processing and mailing times during the 2020 general election, making it difficult to complete the voting process in a short period of time. Notably, even with the challenges posed by a worldwide pandemic, the 45-day deadline seemed to be enough to complete the voting process, with ballots requested before the deadline being returned at similar rates as those during previous election cycles.

Data show that *UOCAVA* voters in states and jurisdictions reporting ESB data returned their ballots earlier in 2020 compared to the 2018 and 2016 general elections. Figure 2 shows that overall, ballots in 2020 were received about three days ahead of those for the 2016 presidential election; that is, for example, 60% of the ballots were returned 11 days before Election Day in 2020, while the 60% mark was reached 7 days before Election Day in 2016 (and 6 days before Election Day in 2018). The earlier return of ballots in 2020 was likely influenced by voters following the recommendations of returning their ballots as early as possible to avoid potential pandemic-related delays and ensure their ballots were counted.

Figure 2. *UOCAVA* Voters Returned Their Ballots Earlier in 2020 Than in the Previous Two General Elections.
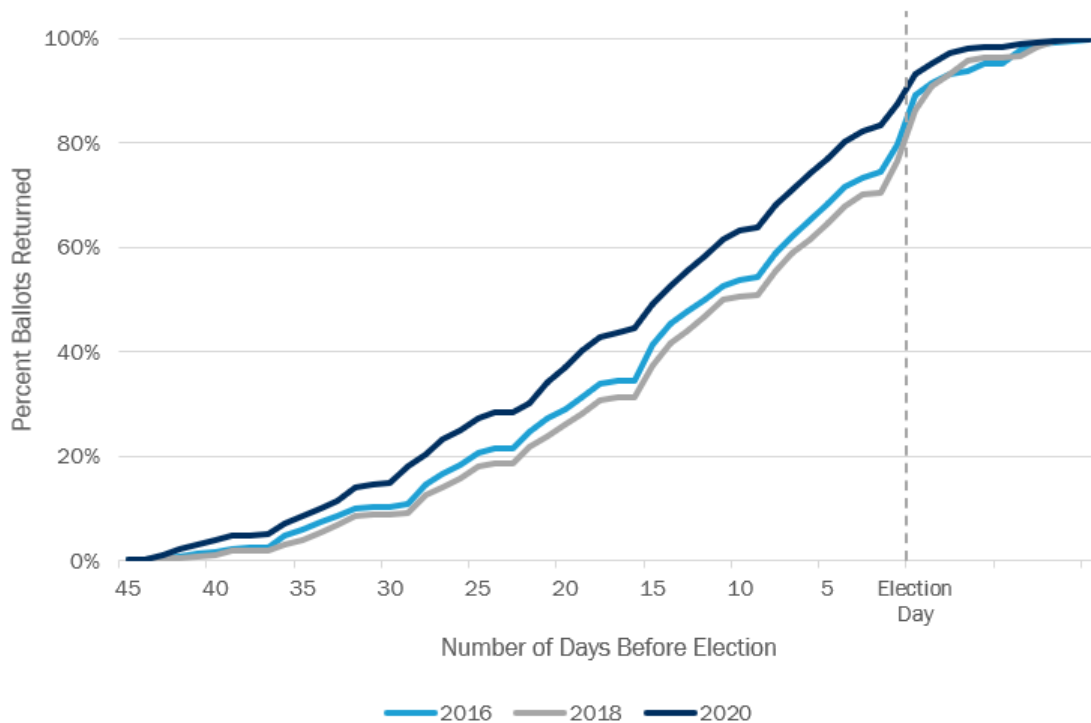
Conclusions. Overall, this research note further supports the importance that *UOCAVA* and the *MOVE Act* have for allowing *UOCAVA* voters to complete the voting process in time. The analyses show that the 45-day deadline was sufficient to give voters enough time to successfully cast a ballot in challenging circumstances, such as voting from away from their voting jurisdiction during a pandemic. Results also show that ballots requested during the election year and before the 45-day deadline had higher return rates, further supporting FVAP's recommendation that *UOCAVA* voters send a ballot request early every election year to ensure that their information is up to date and that they will receive a blank ballot with enough time to successfully complete the voting process. Finally, transactional data allowed examination of the timeline for ballot return and showed a change in the behavior of *UOCAVA* voters, who returned their ballots earlier in 2020 compared to the previous two general elections.