

CASE STUDY

MINNESOTA TAKES THE LEAD

IN 2008 WEB SERVICES AND OUTREACH FOR
OVERSEAS AND MILITARY ABSENTEE VOTERS
HELPED DETERMINE ELECTION RESULTS



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MINNESOTA TAKES THE LEAD IN 2008

Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie says increased participation from overseas and military voters played a critical, if largely overlooked, role in his state's 2008 elections, including the Franken vs. Coleman race for a contested U.S. Senate seat.

Thanks to a concerted effort from Ritchie and other state election officials, the number of overseas absentee ballots increased substantially in 2008 compared to the 2006 General Election. Not only that, but Minnesota voters living overseas reported higher levels of satisfaction with the process than voters from most other states. This quantitative and qualitative evidence marks Minnesota as a clear electoral success story for its absentee voters abroad. The hard-fought and extended Senate race, which will in the end be decided by slightly more than 300 ballots, also offers dramatic evidence that every vote counts.

The 2008 election demonstrated Minnesota's commitment to its residents living overseas, both military and civilian. But it also demonstrates the need for similar action in every state to increase participation from the approximately 4.9 million eligible American voters living temporarily or permanently abroad.

Minnesota is, hopefully, at the forefront of what will become an ongoing, nationwide effort to address complaints from US residents abroad about chronic difficulties when they try to take part in state and federal elections. These difficulties include confusing or onerous registration requirements that make it difficult to complete the process, requested ballots that arrive too late or not at all, and ballots that are submitted but then rejected too late to repair the problem.

In contrast, the outreach to absentee Minnesota voters resulted in additional ballots cast in 2008 and inspired some overseas voters to permanently engage in the electoral process.

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“This is the first time that I have voted from abroad. I have always wanted to but thought the process would be too difficult. I was pleasantly surprised to find it quite easy and will continue to vote in the future now that I have found the way,” said one Minnesota absentee voter in a post-election survey of more than 24,000 overseas

voters in 186 countries conducted by Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF). OVF is a nonprofit organization providing non-partisan voting services and information to American citizens and U.S. military personnel abroad; it was also a significant partner in Minnesota's outreach efforts.

MINNESOTA'S 2008 GAINS IN OVERSEAS ABSENTEE VOTING

Minnesota election officials learned many lessons from the excruciatingly long 2008 election cycle, one that will not be officially over until June 2009 and which generated drama at every turn. The state's long-planned efforts to increase overseas participation have been overshadowed by the attention to the Franken v. Coleman recount. Nonetheless, Secretary of State Ritchie says the importance of reaching out to these voters stands as perhaps one of the clearest of 2008's lessons.

There are specific reasons why it is necessary to reach out to these voters.

The *Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (UOCAVA)* is a federal law that protects voting rights to U.S. citizens residing outside the United States, including those serving in the Armed Forces. While the federal government sets the guidelines for this fundamental piece of voting rights legislation, the individual states must implement UOCAVA. Obviously enough, when a single voting program must be interpreted and executed by 55 states and territories (and the nearly 10,000 jurisdictions within them), the result is confusion and inconsistency as to voting deadlines and procedures.

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Better implementation of UOCAVA remains a challenge for all levels of government and several bills recently introduced on Capital Hill address some of these issues. But a few states and non-government organizations have already recognized and started to act on identified problems.

Ritchie led the charge to increase and improve overseas participation because he recognized the deep responsibility felt by overseas Americans to participate in the electoral process.

“Love of a place coupled with respect for taking care of the place you love is one of the main reasons people vote,” Ritchie said. “People living overseas often long to be part of something that connects them directly with the place they love.”

Minnesota took innovative steps to reach overseas voters through state-of-the-art online tools and personalized services. Ritchie linked 2008’s success to a combination of three key elements:

- a customized easy-to-use website
- focused voter outreach
- proactive legislative initiatives

Ritchie, as a lifetime member in the Association of the United States Army, is especially attentive to the concerns of military personnel stationed overseas.

During the 2008 General Election, Minnesota sent 5,745 absentee ballots to military personnel stationed overseas and their dependents; 3,702 of these were returned, of which 306 were rejected by election officials. This compares to 1,276 such ballots returned in 2006, 204 of which were rejected.

Granted, the 2008 presidential election sparked particular interest and higher participation overall. But Minnesota’s 2008 military absentee ballot return rate of 64.4 percent, although still below the national absentee ballot return rate, is

two-and-a-half times better than the national military absentee ballot return rate of 26.2 percent, according to veterans’ organization The National Defense Committee.

On Election Day, Minnesotans also participated in the “Vote in Honor of a Veteran” awareness program designed to remind voters of the sacrifices made by the brave men and women in uniform to defend the right to vote. Voters wore buttons with the name of a veteran written on them. In this way, voters proudly showcased their respect for veterans in their lives. Ritchie wore a button inscribed with the name of his father, Alfred Ritchie, a Marine who served in World War II.

Although this gesture was a touching reminder of why many overseas voters make every effort to continue to vote, civilian UOCAVA voters outnumber potential military voters and Minnesota made strides amongst this constituency as well.

Minnesota sent 6,087 ballots in 2006 to civilian voters overseas; only 1,886 of these were returned and 263 of those were rejected. In 2008, however, Minnesota sent 10,124 UOCAVA ballots to civilians, 8,389 of which were returned with 463 subsequently rejected.

MINNESOTA UOCAVA VOTER GAINS

VOTERS REACHED

	2006	2008	% Increase
UOCAVA ballots transmitted	11,931	15,869	33%
UOCAVA ballots returned	3,162	12,091	282%

EFFECTIVENESS: RETURN AND REJECTION RATES

	2006	2008
% transmitted ballots returned	26.5%	76.2%
% returned ballots rejected	14.8%	6.4%

These numbers show that Minnesota reached more voters and reached them much more effectively in 2008 with the result: more ballots successfully cast.

These changes were evident in Overseas Vote Foundation's 2008 Post-Election Survey results as well with Minnesota voters reporting a higher level of satisfaction with the entire registration and voting process.

OVF's survey gathered data from voters resident in all 50 states, including 785 responses from Minnesota. Overall, the survey illustrates to what degree UOCAVA voters experience significant difficulties in casting their ballots: the 2008 survey reported that more than one in four, 22 percent, of the 24,000 total respondents never received the ballot they expected in 2008. Of those that tried and were unable to vote, more than half reported that their ballot was too late or never arrived.

Minnesota voters, however, reported 81 percent satisfaction with the registration process in 2008, compared to a national average of 70 percent; they reported an 87 percent satisfaction rate with the balloting process compared to 75 percent for the national average.

This difference is no accident, but the result of three concrete steps taken by Ritchie's office after the 2006 election.

1) MINNESOTA'S OVERSEAS AND MILITARY WEBSITE AND SERVICES

The new Minnesota Military and Overseas Voter Services website was arguably the most important tool in facilitating both the increase in UOCAVA ballots requested and accepted and the overall satisfaction of overseas voters.

Minnesota created the site in collaboration with Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF). Ritchie chose OVF because he had been impressed with its approach to addressing the voting needs of overseas and military voters: "*OVF recognized a problem invisible to most Americans, namely the issues faced by overseas voters, and developed a suite of online tools and services to address them.*" OVF's own website, already provides information to thousands of overseas Americans about registering to

vote and casting ballots from abroad (www.overseasvotefoundation.org).

But OVF wanted to go further by working with individual states. In 2007, the organization introduced the State Hosted Systems Program to help individual states and voter outreach organizations create their own customized websites.

These tailored websites include the full range of OVF voter registration, balloting and information tools specific to the state's requirements. Minnesota was the first state to voice interest in developing a State Hosted System for their military and overseas voters (minnesota.overseasvotefoundation.org).

"The project development was driven by an internal Minnesota task force that reviewed every aspect of the site's functionality and design. No detail was too small and the result was that the site met everyone's requirements," said Susan Dzieduszycka-Suinat, President and CEO of OVF. *"It was a joy for OVF to see a state become so involved with developing services for their overseas and military voters."*

With only a few clicks of the mouse, users of the new site are able to complete a registration card and send it to the appropriate county as well as identify local candidates and issues. A comprehensive Voter Help Desk also provides useful information and answers to frequently asked questions. Some counties also developed their own web pages geared toward overseas and military voters and linked to this Minnesota Overseas and Military Voter Services website.

Overseas voters commented favorably on the result in the OVF Post-Election Survey.

"The Minnesota State website was very helpful in sending my ballot ASAP. I thought I was registered, but realized in late September that the registration had lapsed," said one survey respondent.

County election officials also appreciated the state's partnership with OVF. *"When voters went to our new Minnesota website with the overseas and military voting services, the forms we*

then received were much more complete,” said Lisa Athey of St. Louis County, *“There were fewer details for us to track down due to the consistency of voter forms.”*

2) OVERSEAS VOTER OUTREACH INITIATIVES

To make sure that voters overseas were aware of their voting rights in the 2008 elections, the Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State mounted a comprehensive and aggressive voter outreach program focusing on the groups who make up the largest percentage of overseas voters: branches of the U.S. military, corporations with employees living overseas, colleges with study-abroad courses and faith-based communities.

The program relied on key media outlets, the Internet, military public affairs channels, human resources personnel and various expatriate associations to let these voters know about the Minnesota Military and Overseas Voter Services website and recent changes to Minnesota’s election law.

The Office also contacted the Minnesota Congressional delegation and the US Department of State, knowing that many overseas citizens look to these websites for information.

3) NEW LEGISLATIVE INITIATIVES

Also in 2008, the Minnesota State Legislature unanimously passed bipartisan legislation to improve the voting experience for Minnesotans living and working overseas.

- For the first time, county election officials were permitted to deliver blank ballots electronically by email and fax. The time it took to receive and return a ballot was effectively cut in half for those voters who opted to receive an instant electronic ballot. Online ballot delivery is particularly valuable for military voters deployed in locations with irregular postal delivery.

“Email[ed] ballots were extremely successful,” said Secretary of State Ritchie. *“Time and again I received emails from voters expressing gratitude that they would finally have the time needed to cast a ballot from overseas.”*

Indeed, Minnesota voters who responded to OVF’s survey repeated this sentiment: *“I think this year’s process with the online registration, and the ballot sent by email was great. When we did not get our ballots, this really helped save time. We had plenty of time to mail our ballots in after we filled them out.”*

- The new legislation also enacted other logistical improvements suggested by the US Department of Defense.
- The law eliminated the requirement for a US citizen or notary to witness the voter’s signature on the ballot removed a requirement which overseas voters often found nigh to impossible to fulfill.
- The law addressed voter concerns about security by enacting a new “identification number match” that guarantees ballots are returned by the voters to whom they are sent.
- Every county established UOCAVA absentee ballot boards, each of which was staffed by election officials tasked with issuing, collecting, and reviewing absentee ballots. These boards received the ballots cast abroad and entrusted them to two election judges trained to handle overseas ballots and authorized to accept or reject them.

County officials agreed that accepting ballots through the absentee ballot boards at the county auditor’s offices took the pressure off of local polling places and increased the number of accepted ballots.

For example, by law, ballots are rejected if the voter fails to fulfill one of the required steps. Most ballots are rejected simply because the voter forgot to sign the ballot envelope or the federal UOCAVA affirmation. If the issue is identified early in the ballot review process, county officials can contact the voter to explain the problem and send out a new ballot for the voter to complete and return.

Such was the case in Winona County where County Auditor Cherie MacLennan was able to quickly email a voter, who had made an inadvertent error. MacLennan sent a new ballot to the voter and received it back in time for it to be counted.

“With the county office acting as the absentee ballot board, we were able to get this and other issues corrected so every ballot would count,” said MacLennan. Winona County processed 109 overseas ballots with a 100 percent acceptance rate.

All of the above added up to more and better communication between election officials in Minnesota and individual voters living overseas.

Poor communication capabilities are often cited as a hurdle for many UOCAVA voters, especially soldiers deployed in combat zones and citizens working in remote or hazardous areas.

When problems arose in 2008, county election officials were glad to be able to contact voters and send ballots by email. Paul Tynjala, Director of Elections for St. Louis County explained: *“Many times voters noted on their ballot request forms that they would prefer to be contacted by email because the phone and mail service in their region were so terrible.”*

Some counties, especially the larger ones, were able to offer an election official solely dedicated to serving military and overseas voters. Customer service was a high priority and these officials went out of their ways to provide personal correspondence. If a ballot was returned as non-deliverable, officials would even contact family members to track down voters and send letters to determine a voter’s new address.

Minnesota voters overseas expressed their gratitude in OVF’s survey for exactly these kinds of gestures: *“I received excellent services from the voting office in my country in MN. I had a problem with email, and then called me from the US (to France) to work it out, and replied within minutes to further emails. I was very impressed.”*

ONGOING CHALLENGES

In light of the success of these efforts, Secretary of State Ritchie is continuing to work to increase overseas participation.

And, certainly, the need for more electoral participation from overseas Americans, is still there: extrapolating from data gathered by the Federal Voting Assistance Program, OVF

estimates that Minnesota alone has 70,063 potential voters living overseas.

The remaining hurdles for many states include the ballot delivery deadlines.

Minnesota, for example, holds primary elections in September, just 30 days prior to the November elections for ballot delivery. This puts a strain on overseas voters to receive their ballots and return them in time to be counted.

Here again, Minnesota isn’t waiting for federal action to address this problem.

In January 2009, a bill was introduced in the Minnesota State Legislature (SF 260, HF 1616) to move primary elections to June, another change consistent with the 2008 reforms. Such a move would allow counties to send absentee ballots out earlier, increasing the time civilians and soldiers have to research the candidates, receive their ballots and return them in time for Election Day. Holding primaries in June will give counties more time to process ballots and ensure that voters who made an error can resubmit their ballots in time to be counted.

MINNESOTA: AN EXAMPLE TO FOLLOW

While the federal government unambiguously supports the right of all overseas citizens to participate in every election, much remains to be done to overcome logistical problems associated with what should be a straightforward task.

But the State of Minnesota’s example demonstrates vividly that direct action to facilitate overseas electoral participation in 2008 will bring about a more democratic process and an election more representative of all registered voters.

Through the use of proactive legislation, forward-thinking outreach initiatives and a strong partnership with OVF, the state has proven not only that UOCAVA hurdles can be significantly reduced but also that overseas voters will respond strongly and with gratitude to every effort to facilitate their participation in the electoral process.

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