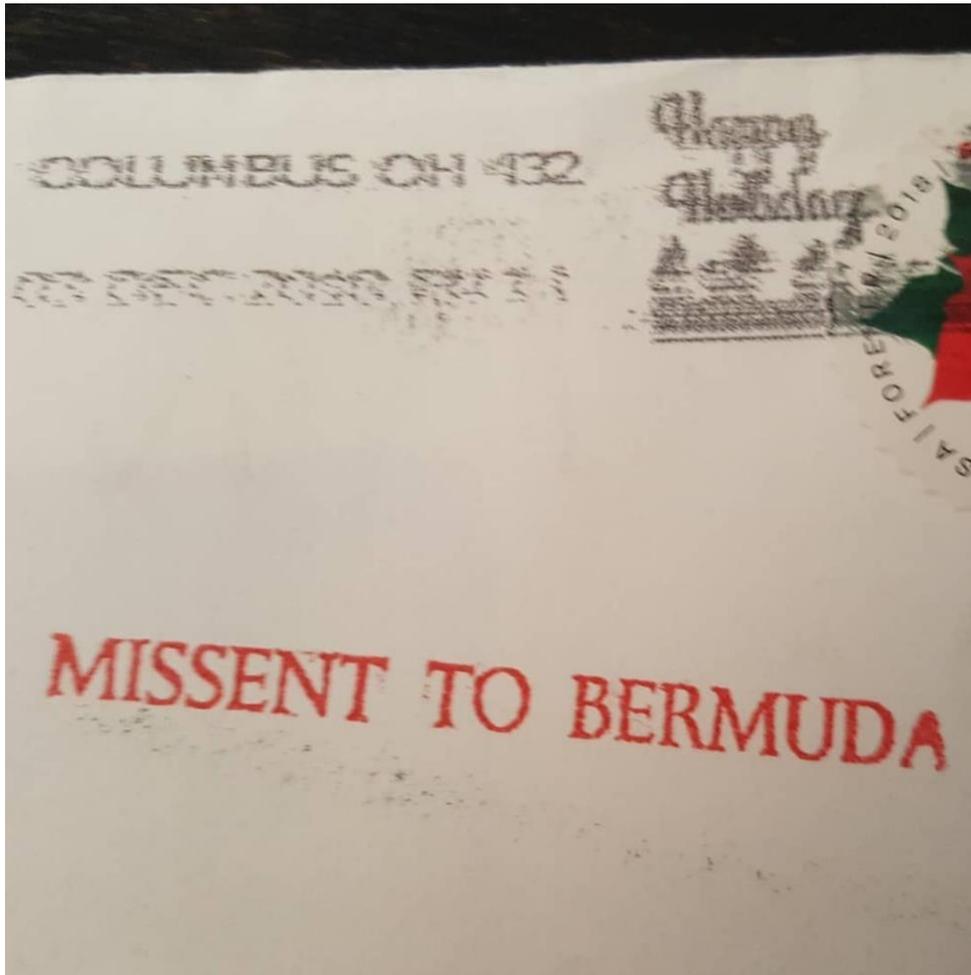


UOCAVA RCV Overseas Voters

Short stories from overseas voters



Center for Civic Design

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This report collects the stories of people who are registered to vote in the United States and have voted while living in another country.

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Preface

Whose stories these are

In 2020, we collected stories from 17 Americans living abroad. They lived in Australia, Mexico, Holland, Hong Kong, Fiji, Finland, Thailand, Vietnam, Morocco, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kenya, Peru, Rwanda, Berlin, Australia, and London. From those locations, they voted in Illinois, Oklahoma, Wisconsin, Texas, Ohio, Colorado, Florida, Connecticut, Michigan, Georgia, California, New York, Pennsylvania, and Arizona.

They told us why they lived in those places, and why they cared enough about American democracy to navigate the extra steps (and in some cases hurdles) of voting from afar. They told us in detail about how they became informed about an election, how they decided to take part in it, and even the logistics of how voting worked in the state they were registered in.

Why we collected them

This project was by no means the first to learn about the voting experiences of voters outside the US. Most of the research, however, centers on the needs military members and their families. This research project focused specifically on individual overseas voters, who often have little help when it comes to figuring out how to vote from wherever they live. These stories describe not only the processes and systems overseas voters have to navigate, but also what it feels like to vote in a county you care about -- but don't live in.

How and where we collected the stories

Reaching overseas voters wasn't easy. We started off by designing a short survey that invited participants to opt into a longer interview. Participants were chosen from the list of whoever opted in; their stories are on the following pages. Connections were made with Democrats Abroad, the Peace Corps. These individuals used their networks and social media to broadcast the survey.

All participants were interviewed by video chat from whatever country they were living in at the moment. At the time of these interviews were conducted, the COVID-19 pandemic had caused some participants to return back to the US.

Insights from Overseas Voters

Overseas voters do a lot of work to vote, often for little return.

For two participants we spoke with, the process of casting a ballot overseas was smooth. But for most, the participants we spoke with described feelings that ranged from slightly confused to extremely disappointed. Causes included everything from unclear information from state websites to extremely late mail. Despite this, voters remained determined to cast a ballot. Sometimes they took several months to engage in the process. Many voters we spoke to never knew if their ballot was received. Several suspected it wasn't even counted.

- A PhD student in Finland explained that when dealing with a complex system like voting abroad, it's better to do as much as you can and hope for the best. "If we don't check, we can believe [our vote] was successful!"
- A participant voting from Bosnia said "I pray that it ends up in the place it's supposed to. I do my part and hope it ends up in the right place."
- A participant voting from Mexico said "We just take it in good faith that it will arrive and be counted. Who knows if that's true or not. We do our part on our end."
- A former Peace Corps volunteer voting in Michigan from Morocco said "It doesn't make sense to me that I'd have to start 3 months in advance."

Understanding the ballot is hard, even if you're engaged in US politics and news.

We asked participants in our study how they got information about an upcoming election. We also asked if they talked about US politics in the country where they lived. In answering this question, a few participants explained that when they don't have connections to a state or even a country, trying to vote is complicated. On one hand, they know it's important. But on the other, they don't know so much of the context it requires to make an educated decision. In the end, it creates more anxiety when trying to vote.

- A participant in Berlin said voting “feels like you're trying to cram for a final exam in high school when you haven't slept.”
- A designer in Amsterdam moved a lot while living in the US and couldn't remember where she was registered. She cared a lot about US politics and how they impacted the world, but didn't have a strong connection with any particular state.
- A participant in Hong Kong said that Local races don't engage him because he doesn't see how the issues they are advocating for impact his own life. He said that being from a state “stops being meaningful after a while.”

Some overseas voters know their local clerk. Sometimes, they're even friends.

The frequent need to get questions answered means that overseas voters often reach out by email to their local election clerk. The good news is that all the participants we spoke to who did reach out received responses. The most successful overseas voting experiences we heard about involved voters reaching out to clerks for personalized instructions on what they needed to do to vote.

- A few participants we spoke with had reached out so many times they were on a first-name basis.
- One participant was friends with their clerk on Facebook.
- A lawyer voting from Hanoi said “I don't trust that I won't somehow fall off the [voter registration] rolls. So I always double check with the person who's managing it.”

Overseas voters want to know their vote is valued.

Several participants we spoke to weren't sure all the trouble they went through was valued. They had a great deal of doubt about whether or not their vote was actually counted. We learned from one voter that the process has become easier over the years thanks to email and the internet. They said a decline in interest

from political parties to promote more votes has led to a lack of investment in the overseas voting system.

- A designer voting from London said “It always seems like the overseas voters are always third in rank. First is the military, then diplomats, then me. It feels like it's designed for other people. I'm a second tier user.”
- A participant in Australia said “I can never get the right advice from whoever the Secretary of State is at the time about if I can or can't vote for state races. I keep getting mixed answers. I'm not an Australian citizen so I don't vote here. I vote in the US, don't I have representation there?”
- One voter said “I imagine a whole cast of Dr. Seuss characters mishandling my vote as it reaches a black hole. I have very little faith.”

Voting mechanisms that work in the US don't always work for voters overseas.

We heard many times that international mail was largely unreliable. Even if it did function for the overseas voters we spoke to, many participants didn't trust it and used expensive couriers that could provide a confirmation their ballot was delivered.

- Deadlines and due dates for overseas voting materials don't always account for slow mail. A participant in Fiji explained they often get mail 9 months late.
- A Peace Corps volunteer navigated many challenges voting from Peru. She found out her ballot was never received, saying that the experience “was annoying because I put so much effort to do this. I also felt bad because the race was so close! Also the money I paid, it wasn't a ton of money but more than I expected to pay. You don't make a lot of money in the Peace Corps.”
- While election clerks are often aware of the variation on address types, some overseas voters are concerned their ballot may not arrive. A participant in

Kenya said their address was at the "intersection of these two streets where the mango tree used to be."

- Emailed ballots may be convenient, but printing can be hard for overseas voters. Odd ballot sizes cause confusion when printing. One participant said "I am worried because the ballot I printed out might not go through the scanner."

Rumors and misinformation keep overseas voters from participating in elections.

- A participant in Australia said they often meet expats who incorrectly believe that when they choose to live overseas, they lose their right to vote. He said "a lot of Americans don't know they can vote overseas."
- A few participants expressed confusion about how voting impacted their taxes. They were not sure if they needed to file them.

Short stories of overseas voters

Lynn: A good relationship with your local clerk builds trust. It makes it easier to vote even when you're overseas.

Where they're coming from

Lynn moved to Mexico with her husband 6 years ago. As children, they both spent time living in Latin America and knew that some day they wanted to return. After their children moved out of the house, they made a plan of permanently relocating out of their home state of Oklahoma. While they had dreams of making Venezuela or Uruguay a future home, the economic and political situations in those countries prevented them from doing so. They ended up buying a home in Mexico, which they like because it's 6 hours by plane to visit their children. They're fluent in Spanish and very involved in their community. She and her husband are very politically active and care a lot about voting. She said "if you don't vote you have no right to complain."

Getting informed

When asked if she talks about politics with neighbors or friends in Mexico, she said "only when I have to." Lynn and her husband don't have a TV by choice but they watch the news online and listen to NPR. She referenced the Oklahoma state election website as a good source of information, but she relies mostly on the League of Women Voters guide when she votes because she says it's more trustworthy.

Deciding how to take part

Before an election, Lynn gets an email from her local clerk that tells her when and how to vote in the upcoming election. She often mentioned this local clerk, and said that when they go home to visit their children they will go in person to double check that their address is correct and to do other things. She even has the clerk's phone number, and will call them to ask specific questions. A local

organization called Democrats Abroad is very helpful and has lots of resources to help with the voting process.

Voting and checking results

“Voting is as simple as pie.” Lynn downloads her ballot, prints it out, and faxes it back. She explained that the mail system is not dependable there so faxing is better, though she does have to wait in line. She mentioned that it would be easier to vote online if possible.

Lynn explained that the receipt she gets acknowledging that her fax was received was good enough proof that they’d count her ballot. “We just take it in good faith that it will arrive and be counted. Who knows if that’s true or not. We do our part on our end.”

Sometimes, she said that they send their ballot back with a friend who’s traveling back to the US. They drop it in the mailbox for them.

Michael: I'm not an Australian citizen so I don't vote here.

Where they're coming from

Michael has lived in Melbourne for several years. He moved to Australia to be with his wife, who he met in Washington DC. They initially planned for his wife to move to the United States, but discovered the process could take as long as two years. They learned it would be faster to move to his wife's native Australia. He votes from Illinois.

Getting informed

Michael is highly involved in politics and reads a lot. Democrats Abroad, which he joined shortly after moving to Australia, keeps him informed about how to participate and runs a primary that he votes in. While it's clear how to vote in Federal races, he has a hard time figuring out when he's able to vote in local races. He said "I can never get the right advice from whoever the Secretary of State is at the time about if I can or can't vote for state races. I keep getting mixed answers. I'm not an Australian citizen so I don't vote here. I vote in the US, don't I have representation there?"

When it comes to speaking with others about American politics it's mostly online. In person, Michael said that besides "the occasional American here, I talk to my wife. That's it."

Michael would like to see progress made around electronic voting, but acknowledges it isn't hack proof. He stressed that even for those who are politically engaged, the instructions are unclear. He's written to local leaders asking for change and hasn't seen it. Overall, he doesn't feel that overseas voters are given much attention.

Deciding how to take part

Michael is aware of multiple online resources that exist to help him participate in the voting process. While he mentioned sites like Rock the Vote, he also mentioned that he's friends with his local clerk on social media and feels comfortable sending questions to her.

Michael participated in the Global Democratic Primary run by Democrats Abroad. In this case, they recommended that he request a mail ballot from Illinois and vote for everything on that ballot except President. When he participated in the global primary, he marked his choice for president.

Voting and checking results

Unfortunately, Michael had a strange experience while participating in the global primary in Melbourne. Somehow, another voter discovered who he'd voted for and challenged him on his choice. He didn't know this person and wasn't sure how they knew about his vote. It was uncomfortable enough that he said he might not participate in this primary again. When it comes to checking results, Michael knows where to look online. But he's also called or written to staff in his Illinois clerk's office to find out and always gets an answer that way.

Monique: What if I don't have a connection to a state?

Where they're coming from

Monique has lived in Amsterdam for several years. She and her husband, who is Brazilian, moved to Holland for lifestyle reasons and by choice. They also wanted to set up a design studio together and found that it was relatively easy for foreigners to establish businesses in Holland. Before moving to Holland, Monique moved around a lot, living for a short period of time in Colorado and Pennsylvania.

Getting informed

Monique studied political science for her first degree and cares a lot about elections. To get information, she reads candidate pages and pays attention to the news. Many people talk about US politics in Holland because she says "American politics is unfortunately a global concern."

Deciding how to take part

When she first moved to Holland and decided to vote in the 2016 Presidential election, Monique didn't know where to start. She didn't feel connected to any particular state in the US and wasn't even sure where she was registered. While Monique recalled registering to vote in Pennsylvania when she was young, she wasn't sure if she was still registered there or in Colorado. She said she had gotten a driver's license when she moved there, but didn't know if she had also registered.

Voting and checking results

Monique decided to Google how to vote and found it very confusing -- to the point she almost gave up. Eventually, she found a form that she downloaded and mailed in. She was able to vote but wasn't sure if her ballot was ever received. She said "I am sure it was never counted."

Molly: “If we don’t check, we can believe [our vote] was successful!”

Where they’re coming from

Molly and her husband are from Minnesota, but have lived in Finland for 5 years. They’ve always wanted to live abroad and first made the move for her husband’s academic work in future studies. Now he’s working there, and Molly is pursuing a PhD at Aalto University in design. They love living there and joke about how highly educated everyone is. She mentioned that even the person who sold them a Christmas tree in a supermarket parking lot had a master’s degree.

Getting informed

When asked how or when she talks with others in Finland about US politics, she replied “when do you not talk about it?” She likes to watch PBS but says some of its programming isn’t available there. Her PhD program is very international and said that, as a group, they spend a lot of time discussing what is going on in their countries. Molly has one American friend from Louisiana that she talks to about US politics.

Deciding how to take part

The last time Molly voted was the primary, which she said was “pretty smooth.” She explained that they always worry if they are mailing their ballots back with enough time for them to actually arrive in the US on time to be counted. Out of the three times they’ve voted from Finland, she knows that one time they were too late.

Molly said she wasn’t sure how she could check if she or her husband are registered to vote. She joked “When I apply for my ballot, I get it. That’s how I know!” She said once she got a postcard saying she wasn’t registered to vote anymore. She found this confusing because she has a driver’s license and knows that Minnesota has automatic voter registration.

Voting and checking results

When they voted during the 2020 Presidential Primary, Molly said her husband dropped their ballots off at the embassy. She said “it was probably tested for evil intent and put into one of those white corrugated buckets. Then it gets on an airplane and probably ends up in a weird bulk mail distribution center. Like Bethesda, MD.” She explained that they have to *believe* their ballots made it there and were counted. Only once did they get a response saying they were too late. During the interview, Molly pulled up the email from the Ramsey County Elections Assistant that explained the situation. She was surprised they were contacted at all.

Amerika: Context makes a big difference

Where they're coming from

Amerika grew up near the Mexican border in Texas and moved around a lot before getting the chance to move to Fiji. Both she and her husband have had careers in higher education. Now, she works as a consultant.

Getting informed

Amerika mentioned she had experience speaking directly with candidates about issues that were important to her. To get informed, she uses various voter guides but also says "if there's an issue that's really important to me then I sometimes do my own research."

She and her husband are involved in Democrats Abroad and use Facebook to talk with friends about issues. Amerika also said that she finds people in Fiji often talk about what's going on in the US, mentioning that "as soon as they hear my accent they want to talk about [American] politics." Overall, she doesn't think much is being done to make it easier to vote from overseas. While Amerika has spent a lot of time writing to local leaders asking for change, she hasn't seen anything happen.

Deciding how to take part

In 2014, Amerika attempted to register to vote at the same time as her son and husband. She was not successful and can't figure out why. She even spent time talking to her Congresswoman. Now, Amerika has a relationship with her local clerk and often writes to ask questions. The biggest problem for her and her husband is figuring out how to navigate the mail system. Currently, Fiji is not getting international mail because of the pandemic. Even when things are normal, Amerika said she often gets mail 9 months after it's postmarked. Texas requires a paper voter registration form, and that won't work in a place like Fiji that doesn't have reliable international mail.

Voting and checking results

While she knows there are security risks, Amerika wishes there was an option for overseas voters to submit their ballots electronically. She and her husband voted in the Global Democratic Primary, which she said was easy. For the more local elections that were held in Texas, she mailed in her ballots. She does not know if they were counted or not.

Because she's asked and done the research, Amerika knows that her mail ballot is put on a plane, which lands in LAX. From there, it goes to a distribution center in Houston, and then the regional sorting centers.

Amerika mentioned that you can also drop off your ballot at the embassy, but explained that while it might be secure it often took the staff 3 weeks to sort through the mail and send it. To drop the ballot off you used to have to make an appointment. Now they have a lockbox, but she prefers to take it herself to the post office.

Sony: “there's always a panic about whether I'm registered.”

Where they're coming from

Sony first left the US in 2003, when a Fulbright scholarship provided him with an opportunity to study in France. He's now lived abroad for 17 years. His current home is Hong Kong, where he teaches for a local university in their department of architecture.

Getting informed

Sony still feels attached to the US because he has family and friends in Texas. Voting is important to him because he cares about how political decisions will impact the lives of the connections he has. At the same time, he doesn't feel particularly connected with a state. Local races don't engage him because he doesn't see how the issues they are advocating for impact his own life. He said that being from a state “stops being meaningful” after a while.

Deciding how to take part

A couple months ago, Sony sent in the necessary documents to register to vote in Texas. He did it via email, and said he still hasn't heard anything about whether he's registered or not. When asked if he knew how to find out, he said “I have no idea. Well, I guess there's always a panic about whether I'm registered. So you do your part and hope you get back the ballot you need.” When he voted in France from New York, he said he automatically got a ballot in the mail.

Voting and checking results

When he voted in the 2016 election from Hong Kong, Sony said he downloaded a ballot and mailed it in. There's an option to go to the consulate but the mail option is more convenient. After he votes, Sony said he has no way of knowing if his vote was counted or not. In fact, he shared that he's quite skeptical that his vote is counted at all, saying that he believed “mail in ballots are the last ones to get counted --- they'll only get counted if the race is close. I always felt like my vote won't change the outcome.” He cares a lot about elections and stays up to

see the results on the news as soon as he's available. But he said that the electoral college was a major barrier to making his vote count, especially now that votes from Texas.

Sarah: "I'm pretty sure they don't count overseas ballots unless the race is close."

Where they're coming from

Sarah has been living in Vietnam for 14 years. She grew up in Connecticut and still uses her parent's address there to vote from abroad. After meeting her current Dutch husband, they decided to live together. At the time, he was working in Egypt. The only way to live together in Egypt was to get married, so they did. After living there for almost 4 years, they moved to Vietnam.

Getting informed

Sarah is very passionate about voting as her civic duty, but admits that aside from voting while living abroad there isn't much she can do. She said she deals with all the uncertainty and hassle because voting is the only option for participation in US politics. She sometimes communicates with her local registrar in Connecticut. Sarah said she American friends from other states that make it much easier to vote abroad than Connecticut does. She's involved with Democrats Abroad and participates in the local events they run. The local American Chamber of Commerce holds events too that give her the chance to speak with legislators when they visit Vietnam.

Deciding how to take part

Every election, Sarah begins the process by emailing her local registrar to confirm that she's registered and that she's still living abroad. She prefers emailing them rather than looking online. She said "I don't trust that I won't somehow fall off the rolls. So I always double check with the person who's managing it." The local embassy used to print and distribute little cards that explained how to vote from abroad and what the process was like, but Sarah said they stopped doing that. Whatever happens, she says "you have to be a good planner." Even when planning, however, she said that things can happen late. In the 2016 presidential election, she had to FedEx her ballot to Connecticut, which cost \$60.

Voting and checking results

After Sarah emails her local registrar, they send her an email with an attached ballot that she prints out. The Connecticut ballot she received, she said, didn't even look like a ballot. She recalled that she had to write in a lot of the candidates as if it was a form. Overall, Sarah seemed discouraged when asked if she knew her vote was received and counted. She emails the registrar to confirm they received it, but said "I'm pretty sure they don't count overseas ballots unless the race is close. I feel like I read it somewhere. Military ballots are counted but not mine."

Claire: “Hoping and wishing is not very reliable.”

Where they’re coming from

Claire recently relocated to Bosnia after being evacuated from Mozambique because of the pandemic. Her husband, who is from Bosnia, doesn’t have a visa to be in the United States. Claire’s originally from Oklahoma but hasn’t lived in the US since 2003 after she graduated and joined the Peace Corps. She’s lived all over the world and has voted from many locations. She started canvassing when she was 15 and has always cared deeply about exercising her right to vote. Several times in the interview, she mentioned how grateful she was to be able to vote from wherever she lived, despite the fact that it was always hard. “I feel lucky to vote remotely -- it’s a privilege to vote from where I am.”

Getting informed

Claire’s mother moved to Florida shortly after she graduated. She never lived in the state and doesn’t have strong feelings for local issues there, but feels her vote is meaningful in a state that’s so important.

Claire has formed a large group of international friends who all care about American politics. She appreciates having these conversations, but worries that sometimes they are over-intellectualized. On certain occasions, she’s even been hurt by things she has heard others say about the US.

Deciding how to take part

When planning to vote, Claire said “ss long as I don’t have to rely on the mail, I’m ok.”

She explained that she’s been lucky to have access to fax machines in all the places she’s lived. Different embassies have offered drop off options, but she doesn’t use them because she doesn’t trust the mail. It’s hard for her to figure out if she’s registered because she moves a lot and isn’t always sure if the address in Florida matches where she is in the world at the moment.

Voting and checking results

After confirming that she's registered to vote, Claire eventually gets an email with a ballot that she prints, marks, and then faxes back. She was surprised how easy it was but wondered what she would do if she didn't have access to a fax machine. After it's faxed, she has no idea what happens next. She's never gotten any confirmation that her vote was received in Florida. She said "I feel lucky that I get to participate even though I'm far away. At the end of the day things do go wrong." She said "I pray that it ends up in the place it's supposed to. I do my part and hope it ends up in the right place."

Todd: “Register multiple times, vote once.”

Where they’re coming from

Todd works for an international healthcare NGO based in Boston. He works from the NGO’s headquarters in Rwanda. Todd votes from Illinois, but is originally from California.

Getting informed

Todd describes himself as “American cosmopolitan and not very local,” meaning that he doesn’t pay as much attention to local politics as he’d like. He speaks with his colleagues at the NGO about US politics and also mentioned that “during the last presidential election the embassy emailed something out that told us how to get involved. Other American expatriates in Rwanda will talk about it and let you know something is going on.”

Deciding how to take part

Like many overseas voters, Todd struggles with knowing whether or not he’s registered before an election. He said “I know [I’m registered] because I did for the most recent election not long ago; but I don’t know if registration lasts longer and don’t know how to look this up. If it’s bad to register twice in the same state I might have done that. I would expect the system would have a mechanism to catch this. Register multiple times, vote once.”

Voting and checking results

Todd knows there is an option to vote by mail with the help of the embassy using the Rwandan post. He doesn’t like physical mail, so he uses the system set up by the state of Illinois that allows him to vote using email. He admits it’s not very secure and means that his vote isn’t anonymous, but it’s better than physical mail. To start, he registered on the Illinois MOVE site. He said he “ended up printing out a form, signing it, and then emailing it to a registrar. They say yes you’re registered, send you a ballot, then you fill it out. It might have been purely digital. I believe I sent it back electronically.” Overall he likes the Illinois system and thinks the website is ok. He says there has to be a better way to do this than email and scanning. More notifications that he’s registered would be helpful, too.

Audrey: “There was a lot of drama.”

Where they’re coming from

Several years ago, Audrey was given the opportunity to work at her company’s new office in Hong Kong. She knew she always wanted to live abroad. Besides getting to do some shorter study abroad stints in college, she hadn’t had a real opportunity yet. She moved with her boyfriend and has been there several years. A native of Colorado, her family is very politically engaged. “Honestly, I would like to say it’s my civic duty, but actually it’s family pressure. If I didn’t vote then they’d be disappointed. Parental expectations.”

Getting informed

Audrey is dedicated to researching candidates and ballot proposals ahead of time. She Googles, watches candidates, and looks for plain English versions of propositions. There aren’t many Americans in her network to talk with about the election. While many Hong Kong residents know about Trump, she says that beyond this she doesn’t have many political conversations.

Deciding how to take part

Audrey often gets emails from the Colorado Secretary of State that tell her she needs to update her registration. When she gets these, it immediately makes her think that there is something she needs to update. But when she clicks the link and reads further, she sees updates are only necessary if her information changed.

Voting and checking results

The Colorado system for overseas voters has normally worked really well for Audrey. When she’s ready to vote, she enters some information into an online portal. Once her information is accepted, she gets a ballot to download. She can either fill it out on her computer or fill it out by hand. Either way, she has to print it so that she can sign an affidavit. After this, she scans the document and uploads it back into the Colorado portal. Audrey admitted that the whole process is easy for her and that while she has access to a printer and scanner at

work, this isn't something that others always have. There are physical mail options but she doesn't use them.

Once she submits her vote, a feedback system in the Colorado portal lets her know her ballot has been received with a green check mark that appears along a visual timeline.

Audrey said she has no way of knowing if her ballot was ever counted, and doesn't think it's counted anyway unless the race is close.

Gloria: Making an effort means you care.

Where they're coming from

Gloria was a Peace Corps volunteer who has come home to Georgia. She was recently evacuated from Peru because of the pandemic. Her father, who works for the CDC, was a big influence in her pursuit of a career in public health. He was also from Peru, and it was because of that that Gloria chose to live there and begin to work towards a career in the federal government.

Getting informed

Before her state's gubernatorial election in 2018, Gloria wasn't a very active voter. She was a big fan of Stacey Abrams and thought it was important for her to participate in this election. She had colleagues that talked about politics. "Peace Corps volunteers talk about politics a lot. I had lots of conversations even with people who weren't from Georgia. I remember one friend who was really involved in her county -- this made me want to vote even more. It would have been embarrassing if I didn't vote because the election was so important." Gloria's access to good wifi, though, was hard. This made it difficult to keep track of the news.

Deciding how to take part

Luckily, Gloria's Peace Corps cohort worked together to figure out how to vote. Even though they were from different states, it helped navigate the process. Preparing to vote was a lot of work and took planning. Gloria wasn't in a major city and was two hours away from Lima where the embassy was. She didn't have her own transportation and it was dangerous to use the bus later in the day or night.

Voting and checking results

Gloria found that she was able to request a ballot online through Georgia's website. From there, she was emailed a ballot that she printed out and then had to mail back. This is where the problems began. Peru's mail service, she said, is not reliable and post offices often close for 1-2 hours in the middle of the day. Her Peace Corps training was demanding and she didn't have a lot of time

or freedom to go to the post office whenever she wanted. In a rush, she paid extra postage to get it back. While she got it in the mail later than she wanted, it was the last day according to her instructions.

Gloria eventually checked the Georgia website and found that after all her work, her ballot hadn't been accepted. She said this "was annoying because I put so much effort to do this. I also felt bad because the race was so close! Also the money I paid, it wasn't a ton of money but more than I expected to pay. You don't make a lot of \$\$ in the Peace Corps."

Dale: some overseas voters care more than others

Where they're coming from

Dale has been voting for a long time. "I voted for JFK!" he said as he talked about his past. After studying political science at the University of Dayton, he joined the Peace Corps in Liberia. After he finished his assignment there, he moved back to work for the Peace Corps headquarters in DC. This kicked off a lifetime of international NGO work that Dale did all over the world. When he reached his retirement age, he decided to move permanently to Thailand, where he currently lives. He votes from Florida, where he has an address.

Getting informed

Dale explained that his political science career combined with a lifetime of international work is what makes him care about US politics and elections. "Once I got overseas, I had a whole different exposure. I had hardly been on an airplane when I first left the US. Peace Corps helped me maintain my interest in things American." Dale doesn't watch TV, but reads the New York Times for at least an hour a day online. He explained that most of his American friends aren't that involved in politics. He they laugh at how much he cares, mentioning that "my other American friends don't care. They are all retired like me but they couldn't care less."

Deciding how to take part

Dale says that "In spite of Florida having a bad reputation, I find them to be extremely user friendly and communicative. I've never wondered when I'm going to get the ballot." He knows how to check if he's registered on his county's site. He has a system he's used for years and knows what to expect. The mail service where he lives is good and he knows how to plan ahead in order to make sure his ballot arrives on time to be counted.

Voting and checking results

Dale gets his ballot via email. He doesn't have a printer at home, so he puts the ballot on a thumb drive and takes it to a print shop. He then marks the ballot and places it inside a blank envelope. He puts that envelope inside another that

he stamps and addresses. After mailing it, he believes his ballot makes its way to Bangkok. He said "it is put in a big bag headed for the US, and then gets on a plane to either JFK or LAX."

Dale noted that the many steps are all opportunities for error, and he said he wished he could send it by email. From there it makes its way to his local clerk in Florida. Once it has arrived, Dale says he can check the Florida website to get a confirmation.

Lana: “It doesn't make sense to me that I'd have to start 3 months in advance.”

Where they're coming from

Lana and her husband joined the Peace Corps together and recently came back to Michigan from Morocco. They had never been very political until the 2016 election, when they felt it was especially important to vote. She began the process a month before, thinking it would be plenty of time. She was disappointed to know it wasn't, and since then has been planning far in advance to make sure her ballot gets back to the US in time.

Getting informed

Over the years, Lana has gotten to know Dawn, her local election clerk. Back in 2016 she reached out with questions. She and her husband are from a small town in Michigan. She said that there most likely aren't many residents from her town living abroad. Lana and her husband are aware of the biggest items from the news, but when it comes to the down ballot items they usually wait until the ballot arrives to do research. In the best cases, she and her husband have had a week to complete the ballots before they have to mail them in.

Deciding how to take part

Lana didn't ever wonder if she was registered, mentioning that after living temporarily out of Michigan she registered to vote there when she got a new driver's license. But figuring out how to vote wasn't easy. She said “When I first started I had no idea it would take this much time. It doesn't make sense to me that I'd have to start 3 months in advance.”

Voting and checking results

When Lena voted in the 2018 midterms, she was confused that she had to sign up again to be an overseas voter. In email conversations with her local clerk, she had explained that she'd be out of the US for several years to come.

After getting through this process, Lana was emailed a ballot. She didn't have a printer in Morocco, and this was a particular challenge. She explained that while

you can put the ballot on a memory stick and take it to a print shop, some of the print shop computers put viruses on the memory stick, which might infect her computer. After finding a print shop she trusts, they have to mark the ballot and mail it. Mailing, it turns out, isn't that easy. It seems that postage for everything they mail changes every time even if the item is the same. The lines at the post office often take an hour.

After finally getting her ballot in the mail, Lana wrote to her local clerk to keep an eye out for her ballot. After not hearing anything for a month, she wrote again to ask if the clerk had received anything. After 5 or 6 weeks, she heard her ballot had arrived in Michigan.

Lana explained that for some people, voting is even harder. She said many Peace Corps volunteers live and work in rural towns that don't have access to print centers or a post office. She says that many of these people don't even attempt to vote.

Annie: I live at the "intersection of these two streets where the mango tree used to be. So that's our address."

Where they're coming from

Annie has lived in Nairobi, Kenya for 10 years. She moved there after working for Boston Consulting Group, which she found unappealing after her work changed in 2008. She now runs a management consulting group that employs 120 people.

Getting informed

Annie believes Africans have a much better sense of American politics than most Americans. Beyond just presidential elections, she said they often follow local races and ask her questions. While her American friends do care about US affairs, many of them choose not to vote because it's too complicated. Annie said "it's almost easier to fly around the world than it is to vote from abroad."

Deciding how to take part

Never having lived anywhere else besides Illinois, Annie is always confident she's registered to vote there. Deciding how to vote from Kenya, however, has been a challenge. She and her husband do the work together to figure it out. At first, they had help from Americans Abroad, but the advice they gave them was incorrect.

Voting and checking results

Eventually, her husband tracked down the local election clerk in Kane County, Illinois over email. The clerk said they never received the forms but said they'd be able to vote over mail, which relieved Annie and her husband. They followed the clerk's instructions and started the process over again, carefully submitting a set of forms that Annie said were different from what she'd seen before. After following up with the clerk one more time, they finally learned they wouldn't be able to return their ballot by email because they didn't have a mailing address. In Nairobi, Annie explained people just don't have physical addresses. Mailing the

ballot would be risky and complicated. Dropping a piece of mail at the embassy was a complicated process that required making an appointment, driving through hours of traffic, and waiting. In the end, Annie discovered she had a friend who could take the ballot back to the US and mail it for them.

Bob: "A lot of Americans don't know they can vote overseas."

Where they're coming from

Bob lives in Australia with his wife, a native Australian. He grew up in Connecticut and never thought he'd leave. When he met his wife, they decided together that someday they would live abroad. After moving around in the US to Detroit and Washington DC, they eventually moved to England before retiring to Australia. Bob and his wife vote from Arizona because their son lives there and because it's a swing state.

Getting informed

Bob has been voting overseas for a long time. He said "it's changed a lot over 25 years. It's mostly changed for the better." He explained that the systems are easier to use and the internet has made the process more efficient. Before, he explained that overseas voters had to get their ballots notarized by a US notary in whatever country they were living, which was extremely difficult. But while things might be more efficient, he senses a strong decline in political parties advocating for overseas voters to participate. He said "in the old days, [voting] was a huge part of their existence -- they believed that more votes were better."

Deciding how to take part

Bob gets regular emails from a person in Maricopa County, Arizona where he is registered. He made a point to meet him in person last time he was in the US. These emails remind him how and when to take part. He also follows up with questions or to request his ballot. Bob admitted that he knows a lot about elections because of his training as a lawyer and because of the time he's dedicated to figuring out the process.

Voting and checking results

To vote, Bob explained that he gets an email that contains the ballot, which he prints and fills out. He scans it and emails it back. Bob explained that he has to confirm that his vote is no longer secret by doing this, but says that the convenience is worth it. There are other options besides email. "You can also

mail it back, or deliver it to a consulate or embassy and this is very cumbersome.” The biggest problem most people have, Bob said, is that they engage in the process too late. Many people ask him for help and he often has to explain to them that they didn’t start early enough.

Jason: “I didn’t feel empowered.”

Where they’re coming from

Jason votes from Ohio but now lives in Berlin. When I asked why voting was important to him, he explained it was a loaded question. He said “I don't actually know if it's important to me. I do it out of guilt, pre-guilt of not doing it.”

Getting informed

There are opportunities to get involved in Berlin, but lately Jason has avoided these events. He also doesn’t have a lot of American friends to discuss US politics with. It wasn’t clear that he would even if he had them. Jason said the process of getting informed about a context, state, and country you no longer live in is difficult. Because you’re not there, you aren’t hearing about issues the same way. You don’t hear people talking about things on the street, and it can be hard to be informed when it’s time to vote. He said “it feels like you're trying to cram for a final exam in high school when you haven't slept.”

Deciding how to take part

Jason explained that the last time he tried to vote the experience was “so bad that I didn't feel empowered at all.” He began by requesting the ballot by mail from Ohio. It never arrived, so he called his clerk. Eventually it did arrive.

Voting and checking results

The voting process Jason completes for Ohio is entirely by mail. He said he’s used to this because all of the “important stuff in Germany is done on paper.” While it isn’t convenient, he sees both sides to using paper ballots. He said “I also appreciate the fidelity that paper represents. I'm conflicted because tampering with technology can impact democracy. It matters who owns the technology and how transparent the technology is.”

For the most recent primary, Jason participated in the Global Democratic Primary that took place at a cafe in Berlin, which he said was much easier. When he mails paper ballot, he has no way of knowing if it made it back to Ohio. He said “I

imagine a whole cast of Dr. Seuss characters mishandling my vote as it reaches a black hole. I have very little faith.”

Kara: “it feels like it's designed for other people. I'm a second-tier user.”

Where they're coming from

Kara lived in Florida, Pennsylvania, and New York before moving to London for work a few years ago. She works for the UK Digital Service and had a lot to share about her experience voting overseas. Her brother lives in Philadelphia, and she uses his address to vote.

Getting informed

Kara registered to vote in Pennsylvania for the current Presidential primary, and said she gets a lot of emails from them with news and announcements. It was through this that she learned her primary had been postponed. But talking about US politics in the UK can be complicated. She talks about them often with her parents and family, but when speaking to British friends she said “they bring stuff up just because they want to see my reaction. If you're only reading news from international sources, they have a particular perspective. There's an element of having to feel defensive, but some of this might be an American mentality....a patriotism?”

Deciding how to take part

In 2016, Kara's ballot arrived two days after the Presidential election was over. At the time of our conversation, she was waiting to find out if her primary ballot made it back to Pennsylvania in time for their postponed election.

The process began with one of the emails Kara received from her local clerk that explained how to vote from overseas. She followed those instructions, but was quickly navigating through a county website, state website, and the FVAP site. She didn't know which one did which and where to apply for her absentee ballot. Eventually she found an email address, which she wrote to. She got a response and was able to request her ballot this way.

Voting and checking results

Eventually, Kara received two emails. One contained the instructions for voting, and the other was an encrypted message that, she believed, contained the ballot. The encrypted email sent her to Microsoft Teams site, which prompted her to enter a password. She had to search for this, but eventually found it in the first email she'd gotten. She said "there were so many codes and passwords!"

After finally downloading the ballot, she struggled to figure out how to print it. "Everything in the US is letter and we have A4 here. The format is really long so I had to scale it down and wondered if it was going to be ok if I scaled it down."

She finally printed it and marked the ballot. The instructions were written for military and diplomat voters and didn't totally apply to her situation. About this, she reflected that "It always seems like the overseas voters are always third in rank. First is military, then diplomats, then me. It feels like it's designed for other people. I'm a second-tier user."

Eventually, she mailed the ballot back to the US express. She had no idea what might happen once it arrived. I imagine it'll be sitting in a mailroom for a couple days before it actually gets to a person. And I don't even want to imagine what the back-office system looks like. Do they check anything? Do they look me up and verify the information that's in their system? I am worried because the ballot I printed out might not go through the scanner."