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DEPARTMENT *of* ELECTIONS

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## Memorandum

US Withdrawal from Universal Postal Union: Ramifications to Virginia UOCAVA Voters

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### **BACKGROUND**

In October 2018, the United States began proceedings to withdraw from the Universal Postal Union (UPU), the specialized United Nations agency that coordinates an international postal system. On September 24-25, 2019, the UPU will hold a meeting to review the United States' concerns and determine whether it will adjust international postage rates in response to these concerns. If unsatisfied with the UPU's response, the United States' formal withdrawal from the UPU becomes effective October 17, 2019. As a consequence of this withdrawal, American citizens may no longer be able to send and receive international mail to foreign postal addresses. The Military Postal Service (APO/FPO) will likely still be an option for those who have access to that service. United States government officials are currently negotiating individual agreements with other countries to ensure continued mail services for Americans. However, because the status of the United States' withdrawal from the UPU is still uncertain, the State Department has not yet indicated the completion of any such mailing agreements.

### **CONSEQUENCES**

Based on the information we have at this time, an October 17, 2019 withdrawal from the Universal Postal Union would significantly disrupt the return of voted ballots to the United States. While absentee ballots can be requested by and transmitted to voters electronically, UOCAVA voters must return their voted ballots to Virginia by mail in enough time to reach the local registrar's office by the close of polls on Election Day.

Withdrawing from the UPU would also interrupt the request and receipt of absentee ballots for UOCAVA citizens who do not request their absentee ballot electronically or do not select email as the preferred method for the ballot to be sent. However, as UOCAVA voters can both easily request and receive an absentee ballot online or by email, the larger concern is how UOCAVA voters will return their voted ballots, as Virginia only allows ballots to be returned by mail, in person, or by courier in certain circumstances.

**Requesting and Receiving Absentee Ballots.** Many UOCAVA voters still request and receive absentee ballots via mail despite being able to do so electronically. To mitigate ramifications for the absentee voting process, UOCAVA voters should be encouraged to submit applications for absentee ballots electronically, and strongly encouraged to indicate email as the preferred method to receive their blank ballot.

For the November 2019 General Election, General Registrars will begin mailing absentee ballots on September 20, 2019. The last day for a voter to request an absentee ballot be sent is October 29, 2019 (after any potential withdrawal from the UPU).

**Voted Ballots.** A voter is required to return their voted ballot by mail. Active duty military, their spouses and dependents may still be able to use the Military Postal Service (MPSA) to mail their ballots to the United States or drop their voted ballot off at a U.S. consulate or embassy. Overseas citizens are not eligible to use MPSA, but any UOCAVA voter can deliver their ballot and materials to a U.S. consulate or embassy to be forwarded to the United States.

### **SCOPE**

In 2018, 21,030 military and overseas voters voted absentee in the November 6, 2018 general election. 5,370 voters submitted their applications for an absentee ballot by mail (as opposed to submitting an



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application in person, electronically or by fax). Regardless of how these voters requested and/or received the November 2018 absentee ballot, all relied on international mail (except for a very small number who due to extenuating circumstances were able to deliver in person or by courier) to transmit their voted ballots back to the United States to be counted.

**TIMELINE & NEXT STEPS**

To prepare for the November 2019 general elections, ELECT is preparing a communication to be sent to UOCAVA voters by General Registrars to provide notice of this potential disruption in international mail, encourage the electronic submission of absentee ballot applications, and urge UOCAVA voters to indicate email as the preferred method to receive their blank absentee ballot. Additionally, a communication will also address how UOCAVA voters can comply with Virginia's requirement to return voted ballots by mail if the U.S. withdraws from the UPU. The communication to voters will include address and contact information for U.S. consulates and embassies divided by regions to make this delivery method feasible for as many voters as possible.

To prepare for the November 2020 elections, ELECT will evaluate the UOCAVA population (distribution, concentration, and access to consulate/embassies), and continue monitoring the State Department's efforts to establish bilateral agreements to replace the UPU. As we approach 2020, ELECT will be utilizing its website and draft communications to encourage overseas voters to submit voting documents electronically and submit their voted ballots to a consulate or embassy with enough time to ensure their ballot reaches the local general registrar's office by close of polls on Election Day.

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