

Expatriate Americans are the most important voting bloc you've never heard of

Around eight million Americans live overseas, a population which would be the 13th largest state if taken as a whole. In presidential elections overseas turnout is around 12 percent, less than a quarter of the amount in general elections. **Jay Sexton** and **Patrick Andelic** argue that despite this low turnout rate, expatriate voters can and have played a decisive role in past elections, such as 2000s recount in Florida. They write that given low turnout rates, both Democrats Abroad and Republicans Overseas have some way to go to ensure overseas voters can play a full role in US elections.



Emigration has been a prominent theme of this year's US presidential campaign, as increasing numbers of Americans announce plans to leave the country if Donald Trump wins. In the event of such an exodus, those migrants will join a community of overseas Americans that already numbers in the millions. Taken as a single entity, expatriate US citizens constitute the thirteenth most populous US state. Yet overseas voters exercise far less political power than they potentially could, given their numbers. As [our new report – America's Overseas Voters: How they could decide the US Presidency in 2016](#) – shows, expatriate voters are an often overlooked constituency that have been critical to US elections in the past and, if mobilised, could be even more significant in future.



The first challenge that confronts any researcher or activist examining the American expatriate community is that there is simply no accurate estimate of the number of Americans currently living overseas. The [generally accepted figure](#) is around 8 million (not including military and other federal employees who account for another 2 million). The United Kingdom is the third most popular destination for American expatriates after Mexico and Canada (and therefore the most popular outside of North America), with the State Department having estimated that there are approximately 224,000 Americans living in the UK.

All overseas Americans can vote by absentee ballot in federal elections, a right they have been able to exercise since 1975. But compared to the general US population, voter turnout among expatriates is low, lower even than among that most notoriously unengaged demographic: the young. In the [2012 cycle](#), more than 876,000 ballots were sent to overseas voters (51 percent of these were to those in the armed services, and 44.4 percent, or nearly 389,000 ballots, to 'overseas civilians'). Of these, 69.2 percent (or over 606,000) were returned. Assuming a population of five million eligible voters overseas in 2012 ([a conservative estimate](#)), this represents a turnout rate of 12 percent. By contrast, general election turnout among [18-24 year olds](#) was almost triple that, at 41.2 percent.

The strikingly low turnout among expatriates may reflect an assumption that their votes are unlikely to have a significant impact. However, expatriate voters have played a decisive role in the outcomes of past elections. Perhaps the most famous [example](#) of this was in 2000, when delayed overseas ballots gave George W. Bush a narrow 537-vote lead when the Florida recount was stopped by the Supreme Court. Had the election been decided based on the ballots that had arrived by the 26 November deadline, Al Gore would have won the state of Florida, and the presidential election, by 202 votes. There are other, less dramatic, instances of overseas voters playing a decisive role in the outcome of elections: for instance, in Jim Webb's victorious Senate campaign in 2006, which delivered control of the Senate to the Democratic Party.

Both major political parties have overseas arms – Democrats Abroad (DA) and Republicans Overseas (RO) – which have the shared goal of increasing turnout among expatriate voters. However, Democrats Abroad is far better integrated into the national party and, as a result, has clear advantages over its counterpart, not least in the voting

opportunities it gives its members and the enthusiasm it can generate.

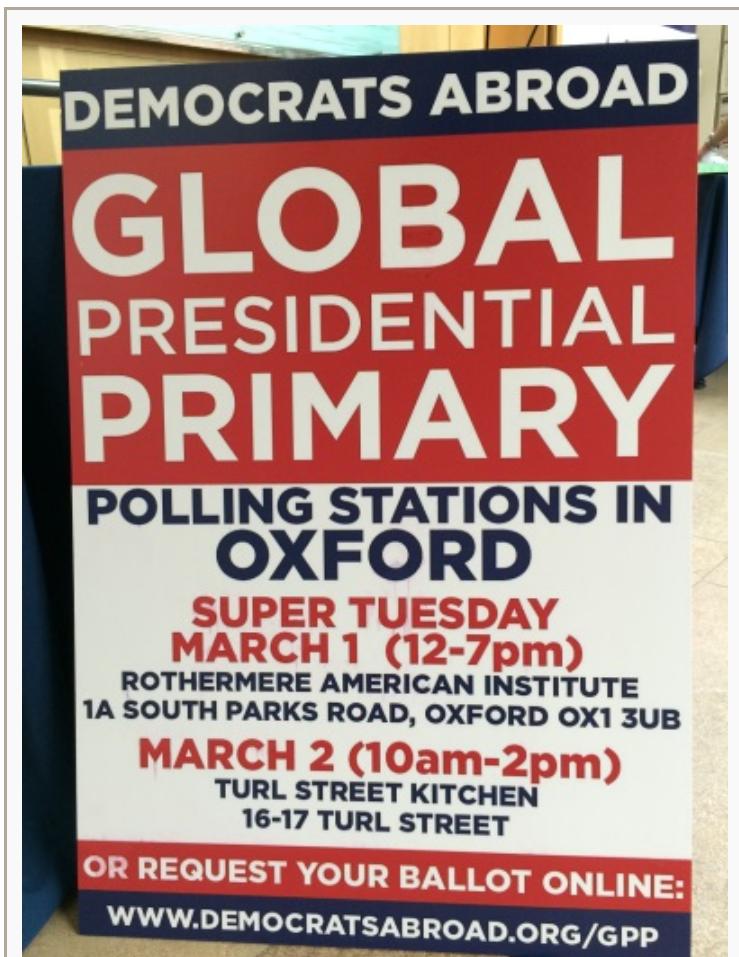
Founded in 1964, [Democrats Abroad](#) (DA) has been formally recognised as a 'state' by the Democratic Party (for the purposes of the presidential primary) since 1976. This means that Democrats Abroad is entitled to send a total of 21 delegates to the Democratic National Convention, a delegation of comparable size to those of Wyoming and Maine. Since 2008, in order to determine the apportionment of those delegates, Democrats Abroad has held a 'Global Presidential Primary' as part of Super Tuesday. As well as being able to vote by post, fax, and e-mail, expatriate Democrats can cast ballots at designated Voting Centers (this year, Oxford's Rothermere American Institute served as one of those Voting Centers for the second time). The [results](#), released this week, showed a decisive win for Bernie Sanders, 69 percent to Clinton's 31 percent, the highest percentage that Sanders has received in any state except his own, Vermont.

Sanders' victory confirms that overseas Democrats are more liberal cohort than those in the US (Obama won a similarly lopsided victory in the DA primary in 2008), but are also hardly surprising given the concerted effort that the Sanders campaign made to appeal to overseas voters. Sanders himself made a video pitching for overseas voters and personally participated in DA's first '[Global Town Hall](#)', a videoconference with representatives of the Clinton campaign broadcast to voters all over the world. The candidate's brother – Larry Sanders, a former Green councillor who lives in Oxford – has also ventured out on [the stump](#). Expatriate voters, it seems, are as responsive to the attentions of candidates as voters anywhere.

In contrast to Democrats Abroad, [Republicans Overseas](#) has no formal institutional relationship to the national Republican Party. It has technically only existed since 2013, though its predecessor organisation (Republicans Abroad) was founded in 1978. To address the organisational gap, a group of conservative American expatriates in the UK announced the creation of a new Political Action Committee, [American Voices International PAC](#), on March 1 this year. Though not an organisational outgrowth of Republicans Overseas, this PAC exists to register conservative voters abroad and promote their issues.

Democrats Abroad and Republicans Overseas remain vibrant and ambitious organisations, determined to find new and creative ways to represent the interests of party members and the wider expatriate community. The extraordinarily low turnout rate among American expatriates indicates that they still have some way to go before this community begins to approach its full potential as a voting bloc. Nonetheless, the rise of the overseas voter, and the growing awareness that a democracy's electorate may no longer be bound by national borders, has the potential to reshape our understanding of not only political parties but the nation state itself.

This article is based on the report, '[America's Overseas Voters: How They Could Decide The US Presidency In 2016](#)'.



Credit: Authors

The LSE US Centre is hosting a voter registration drive, aimed to ensure that all eligible American citizens in the LSE community are aware of their right to vote from abroad and are informed on how they can do so. You can find more information [here](#).

Featured image credit: [Democrats Abroad UK](#)

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

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