

Military OneSource Podcast — Safeguarding Democracy: Trusted Election Information From Your State’s Chief Election Official

Federal Voting Assistance Program

Episode transcript

Intro voice-over:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Our topic today is voting and the importance of getting trusted election information. And with that, I can think of no better people to discuss this than our guests that we have. Joining us today, we have Minnesota Secretary of State, Steve Simon and Mississippi Secretary of State, Michael Watson. Welcome to the both of you.

Steve Simon:

Thank you.

Michael Watson:

Appreciate you having us.

Bruce Moody:

Just wonderful to have the two of you with us. Secretary Simon, you are the president of the National Association of Secretaries of State. We're going to call it NASS, and we're going to be referring to that organization during our conversation. And you're going to be president of NASS through July 2025, and then Secretary Watson, you'll take over. You're the president-elect, and then you'll be the president of NASS. So with that, let's just begin with asking the two of you to explain the role of a secretary of state in election administration. And I'm going to let the two of you decide who's going to go first.

Steve Simon:

Well, I'll take a first crack. This is Steve Simon from Minnesota. This is a role secretary of state, not to be confused with the federal secretary of state. Of course, that person heads up American foreign policy and meets with the prime ministers and presidents

and negotiates treaties, and we don't do any of that. In terms of elections, we oversee the election system in our state. Typically, we do not count votes. That happens at the local level in most states, but we do oversee the process and speaking only for Minnesota, we do things like certify the elections equipment before the election. And then after the election we'll do things like a post-election review or audit. And we work with the legislature on tweaks or changes or reforms of election law. So there are other things as well, but we generally oversee. And as a part of that critically, we work with local governments, our partners who do so much of the sort of groundwork or the frontline work, counties, cities, towns and the like.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, and Michael Watson here. Steve alluded to one of the differences that really impacts many states. You have some states that are called bottom-up, which means the really hard work is done at the local level. Mississippi is one of those. For example, our circuit clerks and our elections commissioners do the really hard work of elections. But the secretary of state's office, we oversee the process. We also help train those commissioners. We help train those clerks, we give them legal advice on how to run elections and if questions come up, what the law says about them, et cetera. A lot of different roles that we play in that. But again, some other states have different organizations. They could be top-down where the secretary of state has much more interaction when it comes to elections. And then I'll tell you, there are a few states, as a matter of fact, that have election commissions.

So the secretary of state really doesn't play much of a role in elections. It goes through the commission. I think like North Carolina, Wisconsin, a few of those like that. So it varies across the country, which is one of the reasons why NASS is so important because we have like-minded secretaries that we just want to run clean elections. And when some states have issues, another state may handle it the same way they do, so they can ask questions of them as opposed to us where maybe it's a bottom-up state. We can ask questions from bottom-up states, what they're seeing in their state. So having a group like NASS, it's nonpartisan where we can talk to each other, push out ideas, making sure that we're working together to have clean and fair elections across this country is really, really important.

Bruce Moody:

I would like to talk a little bit more about NASS and to get in a little bit more deeply about what it does to improve election administration and voter education.

Steve Simon:

Well, this is Steve Simon. The great part about NASS in my view is it's a great connector. It's been around for a long time, since 1904. It's the oldest such bipartisan group of officeholders in the country. And I think what we benefit from is, as Secretary Watson alluded to, just sharing best practices. There is no one-size-fits-all. Secretary Watson's

voters have entrusted him to determine what's best for Mississippi and likewise me and our other colleagues, but being exposed to other ideas, the way other states do things, that's really, really valuable. The other thing that helps is because we have a critical mass of secretaries of state in our conferences, we get experts, speakers, commentators, others with insights about elections and administration that come in and give us some food for thought, give us some ideas about how we might perfect things in our state. So that's a start.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, and I agree with that. And as Steve mentioned there, critical mass, we've got about 40 members of NASS. And I think that's the important part. And again, to highlight it, it's nonpartisan across the country. I think, and I'm pretty sure Steve believes as well, this is probably the one statewide elected position. Some of them are appointed, but it's the position that should be nonpartisan. It shouldn't be slanted right or to the left. Elections should be free and fair for all. And so we should call balls and strikes. As umpires, we shouldn't be making, I guess, decisions that would tilt the slate either way, right or left. And I think that's an important part for us. And again, when you go to NASS, we have the ability to build friendships. And I think that's one of the really important things about the organization where we can get past the politics, we can get past these other discussions, which are very important.

But we also have to remember we're human beings. And having those relationships where we can build friendships and talk about hard things is really important. Look, Steve may have some political leanings that I disagree with. That's okay. He may disagree with some of mine. That's okay. We still have the opportunity to build a friendship and talk through those issues. And I think that's really important, again, to highlight about NASS.

Bruce Moody:

So I am getting that there is the opportunity to collaborate, for secretaries of state to collaborate through NASS. Maybe you can talk about this a little bit more to give us a sense of how you're able to work together to enable improved election practices nationwide.

Steve Simon:

Well, this is Steve Simon. I think some of it isn't one-size-fits-all. Some of it is all the Secretaries collaborating and putting their heads together on an issue. But sometimes there might be regional issues. There might be those that affect states in the upper Midwest or in the South. Sometimes it's not regional, but it's situational. Eight states have laws, for example, that are affected by a proposed change in federal law. So it's not just about all of us, all forty-some members of NASS collaborating or thinking about the same problem. There are smaller groups that can work together, and those

friendships and those relationships that develop are really important. And party label very often tends to just completely go out the window.

If Congress is considering a law that might impact a state law, very often... Sure, it's eight states. It might be four states that have a Republican secretary of state and four states that have a Democratic secretary of state. Nobody cares about party designation. It's just a concern about what a federal law change might mean. So that's another way of collaborating. It's not just everyone focused on an issue. There are either regional or sort of other divisions that have clusters of secretaries working with one another.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, I couldn't agree more with Steve there. And the idea that states can talk to each other about what's going on in your state, and a great example, when you see some kind of cybersecurity threat, if it touches some state first and that Secretary gives all of us a heads-up to know what to look for, really important kind of warning there from different states, from what you're seeing in your state to, "Hey, get ready. This may be coming next to Mississippi or next to Minnesota," or wherever it may be in the country. And to Steve's point there, the idea that sometimes the federal government leans on us, we all understand that it's the state's job to run elections. And so we band together on that one quite often to make sure that the federal government isn't overreaching into our space.

Bruce Moody:

So I'm a retired Navy chief, and I voted in every election, and honestly, every time I voted, it was different. There was a different process. I was in a different location. So I'm really interested in learning what are the key steps in the voter registration process and how does your office or how do your offices ensure it's accessible to all eligible voters? And this would absolutely include military personnel and their families. Secretary Simon, let's start with you.

Steve Simon:

Yeah. Well, this is another great example where states vary in their requirements and that's by design. It's supposed to be left to the states more or less. In Minnesota, the way we like to talk about it is that voter registration really just means two things, not 20, not eight, just two. It means you've got to show that you are who you say you are and you live where you say you live. Those are the two major things. And in Minnesota at least, we have a pretty long list of things you can use to show either or both of those. The most common one obviously is a driver's license, but not everyone has one of those or a state ID. So there are other ways that you can show you are who you say you are or you live where you say you live.

Now for military voters, there are shortcuts, as you may know in federal law, that enable active-duty military in particular to more easily show, at least under our state

law and federal law, that they live where they say they live. And military ID, for example, is a cinch in terms of you are who you say you are. So we are confident that the combination of federal law and state law shortcuts really do provide an advantage to members of the military and their families who are often mobile, who, as you described in your own military career, are moving from place to place. And so we want to accommodate that and honor that.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, great points there by Steve. And I would just follow up and say there are a couple of federal guidelines. Clearly, we have to follow the National Voter Registration Act of 1993 and then HAVA, Help America Vote Act. Outside of those, that kind of framework, it then goes down specifically through the states. So they set their process and statute as well as sometimes the regulatory impact by the secretary of state's office. But it does vary a little bit from state to state. And again, the key thing there is to make sure that we're reaching out. And I'm really proud of our efforts. We've helped to register close to 300,000 new voters here in Mississippi since I've been in office. And that's an important part.

And I think all of us really stress the idea of getting out around the state, encouraging folks to make sure that they're not taking for granted the men and women who fought so hard for this right for us to vote. So registration plays a big role, but Steve's dead on there. It does vary a little bit from state to state, but there are some similarities because of federal law.

Bruce Moody:

What efforts are made to accommodate voters with disabilities or language barriers? And maybe Secretary Watson, we'll start with you.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, there's different ways we do that. For example, in all of our precincts, we also have ADA-compliant machines. So it's up to each state to really address that specifically. Again, there are some federal rules and laws that we abide by when it comes to elections. Obviously, Americans with disabilities is an issue that we all try to take a hard look at to make sure that we're doing everything we can to present them with the same opportunities everybody else has. And I think that's an important role that we play as well at the state level. But perfect example, again, going back to our precincts, we have ADA machines there. Obviously, the precincts have to be accessible. So there's different things that we do to reach out to that community.

Steve Simon:

This is Steve. In Minnesota, as to disabilities, we allow in Minnesota sort of a shortcut, much like those in the military enjoy, which is if you're disabled, you can receive your ballot electronically, an absentee ballot, if you wish. If you wish to vote by absentee, and

a person might not, but if you wish to do that, just like someone who's serving overseas, you can receive that ballot electronically. So that's one example. In terms of non-English languages, we do provide voting materials both online and on paper in multiple languages in Minnesota just for ease and convenience for those whose native language isn't English. Of course, it goes without saying that you can only vote in this country and certainly in Minnesota if you are a U.S. citizen.

Bruce Moody:

Now, how do you educate voters about the different methods of voting that are available that would include in-person, by mail, absentee voting, especially for those who are in the military? And Secretary Simon, if you can get us started.

Steve Simon:

Sure. Well, in Minnesota it's primarily three methods of voting. One is voting on game day, on election day at a polling place. That's the most common and popular. But we also have an early voting period called an absentee period where people can either vote in-person or they can have the ballot sent to them. And for folks in the military, it's very often that last one that is used. And so we work with our National Guard, we work with the military both in Washington and in Minnesota to make sure that folks are getting the message about what their options are and also questions about timing.

We really are concerned with any member of the military who might get an absentee ballot but not get it back in time. Minnesota's a state... I think most states are like this, where the ballot has to be received by Election Day. It's not a postmark issue, it's got to be received by Election Day. So we always try to through the proper chain of command warn or advise members of the military to keep that in mind, to provide enough lead time so that their ballot gets back in time to be counted.

Michael Watson:

In Mississippi, one of the things we've done, really proud of our team, our Elections 101 campaign is I think we've put together to really educate all Mississippians on from the time that you go register to vote to the time that you walk in and cast your ballot to the time that it's tabulated and counted who's in charge of what. And so it walks through basically every facet of elections. How do you register? Who's in charge of registration? So we do a lot of education here in Mississippi to make sure people understand the process and understand who to hold accountable if something goes wrong in that process. So I think that's a really important thing that we do.

As Steve mentioned there on the military piece, we all deal with UOCAVA, which is our uniformed and oversees citizens. So we've developed safe vote here for UOCAVA voters. It's an easier process as well as we're launching our Vote for a Vet campaign on Sept. 10 to honor and recognize our important heroes that many of them died for this, right? But they did fight for us, and that's one of the things that we always try to honor. So there

are different ways to educate and that's one key role that the secretary of states in all states play though, is making sure people understand the process, how they can register, how they can vote and then oversee it as well.

Bruce Moody:

Regarding the process, for me, when I was in uniform, a lot of times it involved voting while deployed often to very, very remote locations. So how do you address these challenges faced by military voters, voting and registering for remote locations or while deployed? Secretary Watson, why don't you get that started?

Michael Watson:

Yeah, so we just mentioned there UOCAVA, which is one of the important ways that we can help our military men and women overseas in the voting process. And I'll tell you one of the things that we've done, and I can't remember if Steve has or not, but several states have as well, not only our overseas men and women who are fighting for us, but also our first responders. So it's another role that we can play to expand that idea of how we can make sure these folks are getting a chance to vote. And as you could imagine, we have hurricanes here in Mississippi. Hopefully, we won't have one this year, but we had one in 2020. And so we had men and women who left their homes to go return power to people who didn't have it and we were able to help them vote through UOCAVA. So it's not just our men and women overseas, which are incredibly important, but also others that can use the UOCAVA process.

Steve Simon:

In Minnesota, so much of it has to do with communication. You rightly point out there's some people who aren't just overseas but are in very challenging places overseas. They're not necessarily on a large base. And so getting that ballot back is really, really difficult sometimes. I don't want to speak for any other state, but I know one issue that some states are wrestling with is whether to permit electronic return of a ballot. About half the states do, about half the states don't. There are trade-offs there. Allowing electronic return of a ballot obviously is much quicker. It means you're not gambling with the mail service on the way back to make sure it's on time. But some have raised some security concerns about that. And so I think states are wrestling with that issue because there's no question. There's so many people in the military who are worthy of that kind of shortcut. It's just one of those push-pull discussions about accessibility versus security. And I don't think there's any right answer. I just think states are grappling with that.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, I want to underscore one of the things that Steve mentioned there. Communication is so incredibly important and in Mississippi, as well as many other states, the circuit clerks play such a big role in that communication. So it takes all of us

talking together to make sure that we're getting everybody the same opportunities to cast a ballot and have their voices heard.

Bruce Moody:

And Secretary Simon, you touched on a thing that I did want to talk about, and that is security concerns. So what security protocols are in place to ensure the integrity of the voting system?

Steve Simon:

Let me give you a particular example of a process in Minnesota that we're proud of from a security standpoint. It has to do with absentee voting. We allow folks in Minnesota, pretty much anyone who's eligible, if they wish to vote by absentee to vote from home. But naturally, that might bring into play some security concerns. So what we do is we require anyone who orders an absentee ballot to provide some personal identifying information. That can be a driver's license number, that can be a Social Security number, et cetera. And only if the ballot is returned with that same number, the same personal ID number that they use to order the ballot, only then is it counted. And that prevents the kind of misconduct that you can imagine, like someone stealing the ballot or stealing it from a mailbox. We also have a signature requirement and we have a witness signature requirement. So those are three levels of security that we're proud of just as to that one issue of absentee voting, which is more and more popular.

Michael Watson:

And I'd follow up on that with Steve. And we've had mandatory voter ID here in Mississippi, which has been a great success for our state. But when it goes to security, you've got to think about the whole picture here. Cybersecurity is another issue that we're looking at. Mississippi's Secretary of State's office, we house the statewide election management system, which is all the voter data, so making sure that's safe and secure. When it comes to cybersecurity, we talk about our circuit clerks, our election commissioners, the precincts, what are the levels of security we need for them. When it comes to absentee ballot, talk about the signature verification, talk about, again, the voter ID, coming in person or whether it's by mail. Clearly coming to election day, making sure that you show your ID.

And if you don't, you've got five days to return to make sure that you can prove, "Hey, look, here is my ID. It is actually me that's casting that vote." So again, it varies depending on if it's a cybersecurity question, which we've clearly ramped up our defenses on that mechanism, or if it's bringing your ID to vote. There's so many different security levels here. If it's testing machines on the front end to make sure that they're working correctly. If it's a post-election audit, there's different types of levels that we all build in at the state level to make sure the vote that you cast is the vote that is counted.

Bruce Moody:

Now, let's get into some initiatives from the National Association of Secretaries of State, again, NASS. One is called Trusted Info is a hashtag, folks. It's Trusted Info 2024, and the other is a dot-org called canivote.org. Secretary Watson, I'd like you to talk about the Trusted Info 2024 hashtag and the initiative behind it.

Michael Watson:

This is so incredibly important, and we actually started this November 2019. We launched Trusted Info 2020, and that's #TrustedInfo2020 to be clear here. And it was the initial effort that we did to really make sure that voters understood. You can see all kinds of things on the news, on social media. What you need to make sure that you're doing when it comes to elections is that you're getting trusted information from the source, that being your local elected officials or your secretary of state's office, making sure that you're not taking for granted, "Hey, I see something on Facebook. Well, it's got to be true." If something looks a little bit fishy or kind of out of place, we encourage everyone to make sure they're asking their officials, their local elected officials. Again, so important from the secretary of state's office to make sure that you're getting that information from the people who should be supplying that information.

So it started back in 2020, and then again, we launched it in November of '23 for the #TrustedInfo2024. The goal remains the same. And look, I've got a great example. My aunt of all people texted me this week, she said, "Look, I saw this little graph on Facebook and I want to make sure it was true or not," and come to find out it was not true. And I said, "Look, thank you for asking me." I said, "Before you share any of information that you're not really sure about, make sure you're telling your friends as well, check with us at secretary of state's office or your circuit clerk or your elections commissioners to get information that is trusted." And look, we see across the board foreign actors who want to sow discord or play somehow a role in the elections process here in our country to be divisive.

And at the end of the day, those are one of the top issues that we want focus on with the trusted information. Again, you may see something that says, "Hey, I'm not real sure about that." Please take the time to reach out to your circuit clerks or your election officials at the local level, the secretary of state's office to make sure you're getting that trusted information. And too many times we see on social media, somebody picks up and runs with something that's not true, and it gets shared hundreds, thousands of times. What I would say to counteract that is when you see information that's put out from the secretary of state's office, start sharing that. That is trusted information that we need to make sure is getting out so people understand you're getting that information from the source, and that's really, really important for us.

Bruce Moody:

And then Secretary Simon, let's talk about canivote.org. This is a resource provided by NASS. How is it assisting voters, especially those in the military?

Steve Simon:

It's a fantastic one-stop-shop and Secretary Watson was exactly right about the #TrustedInfo initiative. And this goes hand in glove with the website because the website, if people go to the website, they will be on a state-specific basis, able to get their questions answered. So it directs users to particular states and those states are the trusted sources. And so I think they complement one another really well. And this is a way for anyone, anywhere, including an overseas voter with sort of a home base in a particular state to find out what the real rules are.

And I can't amplify enough what Michael said about social media, which can be very useful in daily life. We're not asking people to abandon it, but we're just asking people to sort of trust but verify, right? Verify by... If you hear or see something about the election system as it is and someone's saying something about it, go to your secretary of state's office. Or if it's not us, a county or a city or a local unit of government, the folks who actually administer elections and the canivote website is a superb resource for getting that local specific information.

Bruce Moody:

Since we have the both of you with us today, I really want to invite you to share state-specific measures that would benefit military voters and their families and Secretary Simon, let's start with you.

Steve Simon:

Yeah. One of the things we've really stepped up in the last few years is getting a lot more engaged in actual deployments of our National Guards. So it's one thing to be there at the deployment ceremony, which we are, but in the run-up to the deployment ceremony, as you and your listeners no doubt know, there are a lot of resources that our armed forces provide for folks. There are fairs and other opportunities for families, not just the service person, him or herself, to get information about what the deployment will be like. So we are there in a way that we weren't just a few years ago. And it's not just about tabling, having a table at these events, it's about actually talking to folks and enlisting people who are either veterans or currently in the National Guard as we've done in our office to make sure they're having actual conversations with folks. And so really focusing in on the deployment process is one way I think that we have really stepped up our game when it comes to interacting with those who wear the uniform.

Michael Watson:

And I'd echo some of those efforts. Again, the education piece is so important. So if it's reaching out to the National Guard or any other kind of service members in our state, it's important for us to make sure they know exactly how to play in the process when it comes to elections. As I mentioned before, we've developed SafeVote for our UOCAVA voters. It's an easier process. It is all electronic, as Steve was mentioning earlier. And then again, our veteran campaign here, we're launching in September, Vote for a Vet to honor and recognize our important heroes all across this state. I think the number is 146,000 or so military men and women in our state.

And so making sure we're focused on them, making sure they get the information, and making sure they know we want to honor them for the sacrifices they make. So very important to all of us, not just here in Mississippi, but the entire country. So again, all of us do different things. It's fun to hear, like Steve mentioned there, what they're doing. So maybe that kind of triggers some things that we could do here in our state, which again just brings us back to the point of the value of NASS and the relationships that we build there.

Bruce Moody:

Speaking of relationships, gentlemen, I'm just so thrilled to have this conversation with you. And as we wrap up, maybe we should talk about relationships and maybe we can talk about how this all came about because you are with the National Association of Secretaries of State, which has a relationship with the Federal Voting Assistance Program. So maybe you can talk about the importance of partnerships and specifically the one that you have through the Federal Voting Assistance Program and Secretary Simon, can you start off?

Steve Simon:

Yes. Well, FVAP, as we often call it, is an indispensable partner to us in Minnesota, and I would say to the National of Secretaries of State as well. It's a longstanding partnership. It's been a very effective partnership. And it's an example. It's one example and there are many examples of all of us who swim in this pond, this election administration pond, really benefiting from getting to know one another. It isn't just secretaries getting to know one another, it's secretaries getting to know organizations and their leadership. I should mention that NASS has two large conferences every year, a winter conference, which is always in Washington D.C. and a summer conference, which rotates. And so those are opportunities to see people face to face in the flesh, not just FVAP folks, but folks from all sorts of organizations.

By the way, organizations that I or Michael might not necessarily and always agree with, but it's still good to be exposed to them, what they're doing, what they're thinking. But FVAP, in particular, has been a tremendous partnership, has just helped a lot of people be involved in the process, who otherwise would've had a more challenging time.

Michael Watson:

And I'd key in on the word Steve focused on there, partnership. Elections take a team. It's so really important to make sure that we know who all is in this space and what exactly it is that they're doing, to Steve's point there, because we don't want to double efforts when we don't need to, but we also want to make sure everybody's covering every angle of it. One of the things that we did here in Mississippi, I went to all 82 counties to visit with our circuit clerks and our elections commissioners, just to really underscore the importance of relationships and partnerships. So to FVAP, to NASS, to you name. It takes all of us. And I think that's the important piece here of understanding when you have that teamwork, when you have that partnership, goes much more smoothly.

Bruce Moody:

And let's wrap up, and I really invite you to share any final thoughts, a message you would like to send to military voters and their families as they prepare for upcoming elections. Secretary Watson, let's begin with you.

Michael Watson:

Yeah, sure. Look, thank you for having Secretary Simon and I on your show. Anytime we can talk to voters, it's really important for us to, again, educate them and make sure that they're aware of the process, what goes on behind the scenes, secretary of state's office, circuit clerk's office, elections commissioner's offices. It's good for us to have that opportunity to educate voters on the process. And then lastly, again, just want to say thank you so very much to our brave servicemen and women, the sacrifices that they make for us, not only them, but their families as well. I don't take that for granted. And our campaign, we're launching here, Vote for a Vet, I'm voting for my two grandfathers that served, Harry Osborne and Peter Pierce. And so just always want to make sure they understand how important they are to us and how much they mean to this country and the freedoms that we have, especially this so very near and dear to our hearts, the opportunity to vote and have our voices heard at the ballot box.

Steve Simon:

I would echo what Michael said. First, a big note of gratitude and thanks for our men and women in uniform for doing what they do every day, for keeping us safe, protecting our freedoms. We honor you. One of the ways we honor you is making sure that you can help steer the ship, which is what voting is. That's the difference between being a passenger in the ship and steering the ship. And we understand or think we do that, particularly when you're on active duty, you have a lot of concerns, a lot of things going through your mind about your family, about their well-being, about a lot. And we just hope that voting is on the list. We understand it might not be a number one, two, or three all the time, but we hope it's on the list. And we think it's particularly important

for you who serve the role that you do to help steer the ship and to have your voices heard.

And we will continue as an association and no doubt every member of the association to continue to do what we can to make sure that your voice is always heard.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. And we will leave it there. Minnesota Secretary of State, Steve Simon, Mississippi Secretary of State, Michael Watson, gentlemen, thank you to the both of you for joining us today.

Steve Simon:

Thank you.

Michael Watson:

Appreciate you having us.

Bruce Moody:

And I want to remind everybody that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department. We always want to hear from you. If you have any questions about what you've heard today, please go into the link in the program notes and you can send us a note, send us a question or a comment. We would love to hear from you. And we hope you will subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics to help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.