

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Counting Every Military Vote

Election Day is just three short weeks away, yet sadly, the votes of many of our military men and women in uniform, who are serving overseas, will not be counted in this year's election.

In 1952, President Harry Truman wrote to Congress saying, "At a time when these young people are defending our country—the least we at home can do is to make sure that they are able to enjoy the rights they are being asked to fight to preserve."

Yet even today – over half a century later – the voting system for the members of our military men and women serving overseas remains broken.

According to the Election Assistance Commission and the Department of Defense Inspector General, only 59 percent of surveyed military service members knew where to obtain voting

information on base, and only 40 percent had received voting information or assistance from a Voting Assistance Officer.

Additionally, only 16.5 percent of the six million eligible military and overseas voters were able to request an absentee ballot for the 2006 mid-term election.

There are some obvious problems with gathering the ballots of our deployed warfighters. These men and women are often on the move in remote locations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Oftentimes, their ballots are sent to a previous address and are never received by the men and women in the field.

The ballots that are received must still be mailed back – using antiquated delivery methods - to the local election officials, before their polling place closes.

Often there is simply not enough time for service members to receive a ballot, cast their vote, and return the ballot before the polls close.

In fact, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates it takes an average of 18 days for a ballot to travel one way to a deployed service member.

This equates to 36 days for a round trip, assuming the ballot makes it into the hands of the intended service member the very day it arrives at their location.

Incredibly, out of the 992,034 military and overseas absentee ballots requested for the 2006 mid-term election, over 660,000 of these ballots never reached election officials to be counted.

Of the ones that did reach election officials, nearly 10% of these were rejected because they were received after the polls had closed.

The Election Assistance Commission determined that only 5.5% of eligible overseas and absentee voters in uniform actually cast their votes in the 2006 mid-term election.

This is simply inexcusable.

We owe our military men and women more. We have the technology today to allow ballots to be cast accurately and securely from locations around the world.

Last month, I joined nearly 30 of my colleagues in writing to Defense Secretary Robert Gates urging him to employ electronic transaction technology to allow men and women deployed anywhere in the world to request, complete, and where possible, submit their votes.

In July, columnist Robert Novak wrote, "Nobody who has studied (military absentee voting) objectively thinks there has been any improvement since 2006, and that is a scandal."

Novak went on to write, "The U.S. military that has so perfected the art of war over the past half century is at a loss to enable soldiers to vote."

I have been working with my colleagues to improve the military absentee ballot system. I am a cosponsor of H.R. 5673, the "Military Voting Protection Act of 2008" (the MVP Act), which attempts to cut the red tape that prevents so many ballots from being counted.

The MVP Act would require the secretary of defense to collect absentee ballots from overseas military voters and guarantee their delivery to the appropriate election officials before the polls close.

The Senate version passed with unanimous support; however, Speaker Nancy Pelosi and the Democrat leadership, who control the House calendar, never brought the MVP Act to the floor before the House adjourned for recess.

The state of Alabama, however, has been at the forefront of making voting more accessible for service members serving overseas.

Under the leadership of Alabama Secretary of State Beth Chapman, Alabama became one of only three states to partner with the Overseas Vote Foundation to expedite the military and overseas voter registration process. Since that time, other states have followed.

We can never forget that our right to vote was secured through the sacrifice and bloodshed of our nation's military.

Every reasonable option must be made available to enable these brave men and women to exercise the very right for which they have sacrificed so much to achieve.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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