



**Statement to the United States Senate Committee on Rules and Administration**

**For the Hearing: “Problems for Military and Overseas Voters:**

**Why Many Soldiers and Their Families Can't Vote,” May 13, 2009**

Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) is a nonpartisan, nonprofit, charitable organization dedicated to increasing participation of overseas and military absentee voters in US elections. We submit the following letter and report and request that it be included in the hearing record.

Between **4 and 6 million Americans** live or serve our country outside of the United States. Current estimates state that 4.9 million Americans who live abroad are eligible to vote. Despite their sizable number, a large portion of these US overseas military and citizens continue to have problems voting. Insights as to why are not always forthcoming. That has changed.

We call your attention to the results of our expansive 2008 Post Election Survey which bring unbiased, non-politicized insights into the real issues facing military and overseas voters and recommendations for increasing participation. Our results are based on the responses of **24,031 overseas and military voters** in 186 countries, and more than **1,000 local election officials** in the United States. The findings are astonishing and demonstrate that **America is still not doing enough to eliminate the problems that interfere with overseas and military voting**. OVF's report reveals that approximately 20% of eligible voters, who wanted to vote, could not. Given the overseas population, that is about 900,000 individuals or the city of Jacksonville, Florida.

Military voters fared especially poorly. More than one in four, 27.5%, did not receive their ballots – a dramatic 5.5% greater than the overall average but less than the 36% reported in 2006. Of the military voters who did not get their ballots, 39% used an FWAB to vote.

Typical of the frustration of military voters, one soldier wrote in, “Registered to vote. Serving in Afghanistan. Never received a ballot. Tried to use the Federal Absentee Write in process – still required me to mail in the ballot and I was out of time...[I] am very angry!”

For both civilian and military voters who did receive their ballots, a high percentage of their ballots, 39% and 40% respectively, arrived after mid-October, thus jeopardizing their on-time return. With military post averaging 12 to 18 days for one-way delivery, this short timeframe jeopardizes the timely receipt and counting of the ballots. This is the number one problem facing overseas and military voters.

Results revealed that 45% of election jurisdictions reported a noticeable increase in military and overseas registrations and ballot requests in 2008. Our study shows increased interest in voting from overseas and military voters. OVF's web services are helping these voters to register and request ballots, but they still face many barriers to participation.

State attempts to apply fax and email technologies did not appear to improve the odds of receiving ballots. 23.8% of respondents who sent in a request by email did not receive a ballot and 21.5% of respondents who used fax did not receive a ballot. Voters do not always realize that an emailed or faxed request in most states does not exempt the voter from sending in the signed original.

Although voters who were able to cast ballots said they were satisfied, OVF's report reveals that problems remain:

- Nearly one-quarter, 23.7%, of experienced overseas voters still have questions or problems when registering to vote and 14%, indicated that they were unsure if they needed to re-file a registration form.
- Despite concerted efforts, less than half of overseas and military voters are aware of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot as a fallback option when their requested ballot does not arrive in time.
- Election officials continue to cite overseas and military voter address maintenance as their number one problem.

In an effort to inspire effective action, the OVF report details policy recommendations for election administrators at the federal and state levels. Chief amongst these are:

- Implementation of technology measures including online ballot request for registered voters and online blank ballot delivery to alleviate the transmission and timing difficulties inherent in the overseas and military voting process
- Innovation and investment in the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot to broaden the practice of "Same Day Registration and Balloting" for overseas and military voters effectively collapsing the required voting timeline
- Inclusion of overseas and military voters into any federal "universal voter registration" initiative where they stand to benefit from such legislation

The complete survey report is available at: [www.overseasvotefoundation.org/initiatives-research](http://www.overseasvotefoundation.org/initiatives-research)

### **About the surveys**

OVF's 47-question 2008 Post Election Survey of Overseas and Military Voters was launched on Election Day, November 4, 2008 and ran through January 12, 2009. 24,031 UOCAVA voters completed the survey, resulting in a 23% response rate. This was OVF's third post-election voter survey. The 2008 Local Election Official (LEO) survey was sent to 4,944 LEOs in the US. All states and territories were included in the survey distribution. The 46-question LEO survey ran from December 5, 2008 through January 12, 2009, and 1,025 LEOs responded resulting in a 20% response rate. It was the second post-election LEO survey that OVF has executed.

OVF was assisted in the design and analysis of the survey by North Carolina-based RTI International, one of the nation's leading non-profit research institutes and a leader in survey research design.

### **About Overseas Vote Foundation**

Overseas Vote Foundation (OVF) helps overseas and military voters participate in federal elections by providing public access to secure, web-based voter registration tools and services.

OVF is committed to open dialogue and aims to nurture a renewed constructive discussion on the role and use of technology in overseas and military voting. OVF believes that when applied appropriately and transparently, new technologies and the power of the Internet can help overseas voters more rapidly than any other element in the mix of tools. In 2008, 4.75 million visitors utilized OVF's Internet-based voter services.

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