

Senator Saxby Chambliss' Opening Statement

Committee on Rules and Administration on **Wednesday, May 13, 2009, at 10:00 a.m.** in SR-301, Russell Senate Office Building, concerning Problems for Military and Overseas Voters: Why Many Soldiers and Their Families Can't Vote –

Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing today. I welcome the opportunity to examine the problems faced by military voters and their families. I would also like to acknowledge the Ranking Member, Senator Bennett who could not be here this morning. I know he would have liked to be here and we appreciate his leadership on this Committee.

The challenge of assisting our military servicemen and women's participation in the electoral process is not new. Since our nation's founding, we have called upon the men and women of the military time and again to defend the rights and freedoms we Americans hold sacred. Our soldiers are asked to leave family and home, travel to foreign and hostile lands, endure hardships of every kind, and place their lives in peril for their country. It is appropriate that we in Congress do all that we can to ensure that these brave men and women are able to fully able to participate in the cause that they devote their lives to protecting.

Beginning with the Soldier Voting Act of 1942, Congress has sought legislative remedies to guarantee the voting rights for members of the Armed Forces. The current law, The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act (or UOCAVA), was approved by Congress and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan in 1986. UOCAVA sought to alleviate the difficulty of navigating the voting process for uniformed personnel and overseas citizens by standardizing the forms required of military voters to register to vote and request absentee ballots. Additional provisions ensured that States would accept these standardized forms, the postal service would carry them expeditiously and free of charge, and that a presidential designee (the Secretary of Defense) would be responsible for administering the program.

Subsequent amendments included in the Help America Vote Act and various Defense Authorization Acts have attempted to remedy some of the original Act's shortcomings. This hearing provides us with a fresh opportunity to examine how we are doing in accomplishing our goal to protect the voting rights of our servicemen and women.

Unfortunately it seems that our soldiers are not participating at anywhere near the levels we would like to see. This is unacceptable. A 2006 survey conducted by the Defense Manpower Data Center, found that only 22% of the estimated UOCAVA population participated in the 2006 election.

Commentators have proposed any number of explanations for this shocking statistic. Some point to the continuing use of traditional postal services or “snail mail” to deliver voting materials to and from the field. Others call attention to the apparent ineffective assistance of the DOD’s Federal Voting Assistance Program, which the Department’s own Inspector General found to reach only 40-50% of military voters. I look forward to the testimony of our witnesses and hope they can shed some light on why this may be.

Among the witnesses are those who are, or have been, military voters themselves. I thank you for your service, sacrifice, and expertise.

Additionally, we have election officials who serve a vital and often thankless job in ensuring that our elections run smoothly and securely. Nowhere is their job more challenging, or important, than in working with our men and women of the Armed Forces.

Finally, we have a representative of the Department of Defense. Our servicemen and women rely on the Department’s Federal Voting Assistance Program to help them exercise their voting rights. I hope that we will hear an honest assessment of the program’s execution of this very important responsibility and the results they have achieved.

Before closing, let me add a few comments based on my own, recent experience in my own election last Fall. I believe Georgia did a good job of reaching military and absentee voters in the general election in November. Georgia, as well as most other States, have excellent procedure in place for that. I have some ideas across the board about how those procedures can be improved but by and large, in my case, I think it worked well.

Unfortunately, that was not the case with the run-off election in December. Lots of factors combined to make the run-off election especially difficult for military and absentee voters based on the delayed, official announcement that there would be a run-off, followed by the short timelines to send and receive absentee ballots. I think this highlighted some of the weaknesses in the system, not necessarily in Georgia, but across the country, and I believe that we can use that example to make improvements and find ways to ensure our military and overseas voters are never disenfranchised.

Again, I thank the Chair for holding this hearing and our witnesses for your willingness to help this Committee better understand the challenges facing our military voters and their families in exercising their right to vote. I look forward to your testimony.