



IRAQ *and* AFGHANISTAN VETERANS *of* AMERICA

**Testimony for the Record of
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**Senate Rules Committee Hearing on Problems for Military and Overseas Voters: Why Many Soldiers
and Their Families Can't Vote**

As servicemembers, our most basic charge is to defend our country and the freedom of our fellow citizens. One would think that, for those charged with freedom's defense, casting a vote would be simple. Sadly, this is not the case. For those serving overseas, voting is difficult, and for those deployed to a combat zone, casting a ballot is often practically impossible.

I began my military career in 1997 when I enlisted in the U.S. Army Reserves as a Civil Affairs Specialist. In 2003 I was commissioned a 2LT in the Armor Branch and deployed to Iraq as a Platoon Leader from 2005-2006. Currently, I am a Legislative Associate for the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America; the first and largest nonpartisan nonprofit organization for veterans of the current conflict.

In 2000, I was deployed to Bosnia during the Presidential primary elections. Knowing beforehand that I would be deployed, I applied for an absentee ballot. I did not know where I would be stationed, so I had the ballot sent to my parents' house. I assumed that they would be able to send it to me, and that I could return it in time. But my parents did not receive my ballot until 30 days prior to the election, and when they sent it to Bosnia, it took two weeks to get to me at Camp Tuzla. Another two weeks passed while my vote made its way to California, and it missed the deadline. Like thousands of others, my military service left me disenfranchised.

For every servicemember serving overseas, the military voting system must be revised. Currently the DOD uses the [Federal Voter Assistance Program](#), which provides a 460-page instruction manual for how to fill out Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), which is a combined voter registration and absentee ballot application. In principle, it should simplify the process of applying for an absentee ballot. But because states have a variety of different requirements for registration and voting, the catch-all FPCA is difficult to fill out. [According to a Pew Research](#) study, 40,000 military FPCA voter applications were rejected in 2006 due to errors in meeting state requirements.

The people tasked with helping troops through this bureaucratic minefield of an application are the Voter Assistance Officers. But Voter Assistance Officers are not given proper training – or in some cases, any training at all. I should know; in 2004, I was appointed as the Voter Assistance Officer (VAO) for my Troop. The only information or guidance I received was the one-page memo assigning me the extra duty. Feeling responsible for helping my soldiers vote, I set out on my own to find resources to get my soldiers registered. For making this effort, I was the exception rather than the rule; the Pew study shows that in 2004 VAOs reached only 50% of military voters.

In addition to complexity of the overseas registration and absentee voting forms, there are logistical barriers created by the military postal system. Those of us who have been deployed know that the system is functional, but chaotic. It is near impossible to deal with anything time sensitive. In 2006, 86% of the FPCAs were sent via the mail, and with the military postal system average round trip being 24-36 days to and from Iraq and Afghanistan, there is little-to-no room for error. Moreover, given that most service members transfer units every two to three years, and are deployed every 18- 24 months, most addresses are obsolete by the next election cycle. In 2006, this resulted in 35,000 military and overseas citizen absentee ballots being returned to local election officials as undeliverable.

IAVA recommends requiring the DOD to ensure the safe and timely passage of military ballots to their home districts. Ensuring that military overseas voters are able to receive and return their ballots in a timely and predictable fashion is the most immediate step that the Congress can take in protecting the voting rights of servicemen and women. Congress should also address the variance in state registration requirements, and provide the FVAP broader authorities in reducing barriers for military voters. IAVA will continue to work with Congress and our partners in the veterans' community to ensure that no servicemember's vote is lost.

Respectfully submitted,

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