

## **Making Every Vote Count**

Our nation owes an incredible debt of gratitude that can never fully be repaid to all those brave men and women who have served our nation by helping to promote peace, stability, and democracy worldwide. Day in and day out, in the streets of Baghdad, in the countryside of Afghanistan, and in hotspots around the globe, American servicemembers serve our country faithfully and honorably.

As our troops are giving their best to America, it is our duty to deliver on our promises to them. As provided for by the Constitution, “the right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state.” However, exercising this constitutional right is often a challenge for millions of military personnel and their dependents of voting age who live away from their legal residences in or outside the United States.

Several federal laws have been enacted since 1942 to enable military personnel and U.S. citizens abroad to vote in federal elections. Members of the military and U.S. citizens who live abroad are eligible to register and vote absentee in federal elections under the provisions of the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act of 1986, which is administered by the Department of Defense’s (DOD) Federal Voting Assistance Program.

Through this program, DOD provides assistance to military personnel to facilitate opportunities for them to exercise their right to vote. The absentee voting process requires the potential voter to register to vote, request an absentee ballot, receive the ballot, correctly complete the ballot, and return it to the appropriate local election official.

However, because the multistep process of absentee voting relies primarily on snail mail, in some instances it can take so long to complete that our nation’s servicemembers, in effect, are disenfranchised. In fact, although absentee ballots have about a 90 percent success rate in the general population, only 60 to 70 percent of military absentee ballots are successfully cast because of increased mail delays and other errors. What is worse, approximately 17,000 American servicemembers fighting overseas had their votes thrown out during the 2008 election, according to the Election Assistance Commission.

To address concerns about mail-based absentee voting, Congress has enacted several laws to promote electronic means for voters to register, request and receive ballots, and transmit voted ballots to local election officials.

Most recently, Congress passed and the President signed into law the Military Overseas Voter Empowerment Act – or MOVE Act – to further reduce barriers to absentee voting for military personnel and overseas voters. To address delays in the postal system, DOD is now providing our nation’s military personnel more online voting resources, including a ballot that can be filled out online, printed, and mailed.

As a citizen’s right to vote is one of the hallmarks of a democratic society, we must take seriously the responsibility to assist in overseas balloting. Men and women who serve our nation in uniform today and tomorrow are willing to pay the ultimate sacrifice in providing for the common defense. It’s our duty to ensure that the ballots they cast are votes counted.

*Rep. Gary Miller represents California’s 42<sup>nd</sup> Congressional District.*