

U.S. Veterans Know, Trust, and Need Vote by Mail

By Danielle Root and Will Goodwin | June 30, 2020

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During the coronavirus crisis, vote by mail has emerged as a sound policy for ensuring Americans can vote safely and securely, while helping mitigate public health risks. Veterans are uniquely positioned to attest to vote by mail's dependability during the pandemic because of their extensive experience with the policy; many have voted by mail while stationed abroad or outside their jurisdiction of permanent residence. In fact, since the Revolutionary War, military service members have used some form of remote voting to make their voices heard while risking their lives to defend democracy.¹ Veterans can also attest to the current necessity of vote by mail because they are at higher risk of serious complications related to COVID-19: Nearly 50 percent of veterans are ages 65 or older, and many younger veterans have duty-related preexisting conditions.² For veterans within these groups, risk of exposure from in-person voting can be especially dangerous.

This issue brief examines veterans' unique and long-standing relationship with vote by mail as well as the critical role that policy is playing in keeping veterans safe during the coronavirus pandemic. Although it is vital that in-person voting options be preserved during the public health emergency, vote by mail should become the default method for most Americans. The policy works, as proved by widespread reliance on vote by mail by U.S. military personnel. Yet many Americans living on U.S. soil have significant difficulty accessing vote by mail due to unnecessary restrictions on qualifying for absentee ballots and arduous requirements for ensuring their voted ballot is actually counted. And while some states are expanding access to mail voting during the pandemic, most lack the essential infrastructure needed to support huge surges in absentee ballots during upcoming elections. States cannot afford many important upgrades, which is why Congress must provide them with immediate emergency election funding. Without additional funding, countless Americans, including many veterans, will be disenfranchised or forced to risk their lives in order to vote.

In-person voting options must be preserved in any vote-by-mail system

Although states must expand opportunities to vote by mail to keep voters and election workers safe this year, in-person voting options must remain available. As described in a joint publication by the Center for American Progress and the NAACP, vote by mail is often not an ideal option for Native Americans living on tribal lands, Americans with disabilities, and Black Americans.³ For voters belonging to these groups, in-person voting may be required for accessibility or may be strongly preferred. Moreover, in-person polling places provide an essential safety net for voters who request absentee ballots but do not receive them in time for the election.

Thus, in expanding vote by mail, officials must maintain, and in some cases increase, the number of in-person polling locations available in order to ensure that all eligible Americans can participate in the democratic process.

For veterans, vote by mail is a commonsense policy

For many veterans and active-duty service members, casting ballots by mail is already customary and has long been the default method for participating in elections. Retired U.S. Air Force Gen. Michael Hayden, who also served as the director of the National Security Agency (NSA) and the CIA, said in a tweet that he spent 40 years casting ballots by mail.⁴ In fact, widespread reliance on mail voting by active-duty military personnel dates back more than 150 years. During the Civil War, some 150,000 Union soldiers voted absentee in the 1864 presidential election.⁵ And in 1944, in the midst of World War II, absentee voting by U.S. soldiers accounted for more than 6 percent of all votes cast in that year's presidential election.⁶ The military's strong and proud tradition of voting by mail continues to this day. In the 2012 and 2016 general elections combined, approximately 821,000 ballots were dispatched overseas to members of the armed services.⁷ Moreover, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, roughly 80 percent of overseas military personnel who voted during the 2018 elections did so by mail.⁸

The process is relatively straightforward. First, a service member downloads and prints a standardized Federal Post Card Application from the U.S. Department of Defense's Federal Voting Assistance Program website.⁹ The application helps streamline the process by giving military personnel options to register to vote or update their information as well as request an absentee ballot from their legal state of residence at the same time. They can also sign up to receive absentee ballots for all future elections. Second, upon receiving and confirming an applicant's information, election officials mail the service member an absentee ballot to wherever they are stationed or transmit it electronically.¹⁰ Finally, once their ballot is completed, the military voter mails it back to the designated election office for counting. Although some states permit voted ballots to be returned electronically, most military person-

nel return their ballots by mail.¹¹ Service members who vote by mail must comply with voting requirements specific to their home state, such as those requiring that absentee ballots be signed by witnesses or returned by a specific date in order to be counted. For service members who do not receive their absentee ballots in time, the federal write-in absentee ballot provides a backup option.¹²

For members of the U.S. military, vote by mail is not a partisan issue. Rather, it is recognized as an indispensable means of ensuring all service members—irrespective of political affiliation—can fully participate in the very democracy they valiantly defend. Indeed, the U.S. military actively encourages service members to vote. Installations even have a designated voting assistance office to help military personnel navigate the voter registration and voting process.¹³

President Donald Trump and his allies have repeatedly claimed—without evidence—that mail voting results in widespread fraud, despite the fact that many officials in the administration utilized absentee voting this year and in past elections.¹⁴ Trump voted by mail as recently as March 2020. For retired U.S. Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey, “[T]he hypocrisy of the president’s position is utterly mind-boggling.”¹⁵ In fact, data have repeatedly shown that fraudulent voting is virtually nonexistent, and there have been no notable instances of voter fraud reported within the U.S. military.¹⁶ Vote by mail is also trusted, on a bipartisan basis, as being secure. According to former Secretary of Defense and former Nebraska Sen. Chuck Hagel (R), “The first time I ever voted in my life was I voted by absentee mail from Vietnam in November of 1968. ... I never heard of any problems. I never heard about any issues or anybody charging there was fraud, waste, or abuse in any process that involves voting absentee by mail.”¹⁷ This was echoed by a tweet from Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO), a former Army Ranger: “Every year, soldiers ... vote by mail. I’ve seen it first hand and know it’s safe and secure.”¹⁸

While a nationwide shift from in-person voting to mostly mail-based elections may be an adjustment—albeit a necessary one—for some Americans, veterans and active-duty military personnel already know vote by mail to be a convenient, reliable, and secure way to exercise the constitutional right to vote.

Veterans and their families deserve access to vote by mail

Although vote by mail is readily available to military service members and their families while stationed abroad, many are not afforded similar access upon returning home. A handful of states reserve vote by mail only for those who can provide an authorized excuse. As a result, many voters in those states have no choice but to cast ballots in person. This may be problematic for people who lack reliable child care and for those who have inflexible work hours. Military personnel in particular often work long, unpredictable hours, and many families lack adequate child care options on military bases.¹⁹

In-person voting can also prove dangerous during the current public health crisis for people who are older or who have preexisting conditions. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified elderly individuals and people with chronic health conditions as being at high risk of developing life-threatening complications from the novel coronavirus.²⁰ As detailed in a previous CAP column, nearly half of all 19 million U.S. veterans are ages 65 and older, while many younger veterans have duty-related preexisting health conditions.²¹ Some veterans who served during the Vietnam War were exposed to Agent Orange, which has been attributed to causing cancer and heart disease, among other serious conditions.²² More recently, military personnel who served in Iraq and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2009 developed severe respiratory illnesses resulting from exposure to open waste burn pits, which emitted poisonous particulates.²³ For these veterans, risking COVID-19 exposure through in-person voting may not be an option, which is why having access to vote by mail is so important.

Although some veterans may meet state absentee ballot excuse requirements, their family members or caregivers may not. Upon returning from the polling place, these voters could inadvertently infect their loved ones. To prevent this, all voters—not just those who qualify for an excuse—must be able to request an absentee ballot and cast their vote from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

No-excuse absentee voting can only be effective if there is sufficient infrastructure to support the policy. If states lack the infrastructure necessary to accommodate significant increases in vote by mail, then even veterans and others who regularly vote by mail may have difficulty accessing the ballot box. Indeed, it was insufficient infrastructure—not policy deficiencies—that caused Wisconsin’s election system to break down during that state’s April primary.²⁴ Wisconsin’s no-excuse absentee system proved ill-equipped to handle mass reliance on mail voting. State officials never fulfilled some 9,000 mail ballot requests, forcing those who requested but never received their ballot to vote in person on election day. Unfortunately, CAP research shows that more than half of the 50 states and Washington, D.C., lack the infrastructure to support increased demand on mail voting in upcoming elections.²⁵ Absent substantial infrastructure upgrades, veteran voters may be left no choice but to cast ballots in person, through no fault of their own.

For those who have served in the U.S. military, it should not be harder to cast a ballot on U.S. soil than it is abroad. As aptly noted by Sen. Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), an Iraq War veteran, “Veterans are the people who have dedicated their lives to defending each of our constitutional rights and one of those is the ability to vote – to freely vote – in our elections, and to think that they would be denied access to voting ... [is] a shameful thing.”²⁶ Family members, caregivers, and neighbors also should not be forced to jump through onerous hoops or risk illness to exercise a right many service members made the ultimate sacrifice to defend.

Congress must act now to support vote by mail

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, numerous states have taken steps to expand access to vote by mail. Some states are eliminating absentee excuse requirements, and others are proactively sending absentee ballot applications to registered voters.²⁷ In addition to implementing important policy changes, states need to augment and fortify existing infrastructure to adequately handle increased reliance on mailed ballots. To do this successfully, states need support from Congress, as state budgets simply cannot cover costs to bolster vote-by-mail infrastructure. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act provided states \$400 million in emergency election funding, but according to estimates from the Brennan Center for Justice, states need at least \$3.6 billion more from Congress to ensure all voters can participate in upcoming elections.²⁸

Securing federal funding for expanding vote by mail should not be a partisan issue. Studies repeatedly show vote by mail does not provide any partisan advantage; it is relied upon by voters of all political stripes.²⁹ There is already broad bipartisan support in Congress for military absentee voting. Both the Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act and Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act, which codified vote by mail for American citizens living or serving overseas, enjoyed bipartisan support.³⁰ As described by Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX), access to vote by mail for service members stationed abroad is a no-brainer: “Soldiers, airmen, sailors, and marines regularly put their lives on the line to defend our democracy, and it’s only right they have ample opportunity to fully participate in that democracy.”³¹ Sen. Angus King (I-ME) shares this sentiment: “[T]he American experiment still lives, thanks to the sacrifices and commitment of those who have answered the call to serve. It’s only right that we make sure that those who defend our way of life are given every opportunity to exercise their right to vote and have their votes count.”³² In February 2020, more than two dozen Republican members of Congress introduced legislation extending expedited absentee ballot mail service to active-duty personnel assigned to U.S. embassies and consulates, similarly demonstrating support for military absentee voting.³³

Members of Congress already trust vote by mail for use by military service members stationed abroad. That trust should extend to all American voters, including many veterans, living on U.S. soil. According to Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), ranking member of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, “We have the greatest country in the world because we encourage participation. ... Vote by mail should be standard... it’s the right thing to do.”³⁴

Conclusion

Modifying electoral processes and implementing changes takes time—and the United States is running up against the clock to prepare for November’s general election. Countless American citizens will be forced to choose between their health and their fundamental right to vote if Congress fails to provide immediate supplemental emergency funding for elections; many veterans will be among those especially at risk. Failure to protect free and fair elections dishonors sacrifices made by members of the U.S. armed forces who defend democracy abroad. Congress must do its part to protect democracy here at home by giving all Americans access to safe, secure, and dependable voting options, including vote by mail.

Danielle Root is the associate director of voting rights and access to justice on the Democracy and Government Reform team at the Center for American Progress.

Will Goodwin is the director of government relations at VoteVets.

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