



Absentee Voting for Servicemembers

I strongly encourage you to participate and cast your vote in the 2008 General Election. Voting is the essence of our democracy and one of our most fundamental Constitutional rights.

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Introduction

One of the most basic rights and responsibilities of all Americans is voting. Federal law protects the voting rights of military personnel serving away from home, and citizens living outside the United States. In exercising this responsibility, uniformed servicemembers assigned or deployed to locations in other states and overseas, need to plan ahead. Absentee ballots are used to allow those who cannot be close to home on Election Day to fulfill their important civic duty.

The Department of Defense's Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) helps uniformed servicemembers navigate the process of registering to vote, requesting absentee ballots and submitting those ballots on time. The FVAP also assists military family members and U.S. civilians living abroad.

Importance of Absentee Ballots

In recent years, the news media have produced stories that may have suggested that absentee ballots are frequently rejected or simply not counted. In fact, absentee ballots are considered very important; in close contests, even a handful of absentee votes can decide the winner. In California, one-quarter to one-third

of all ballots are now cast absentee;* in Oregon and Washington, most ballots are absentee.

Each state imposes laws and procedures to prevent fraudulent voting and protect the secrecy of ballots. It is important for absentee voters to follow all instructions carefully to ensure that their ballots are counted—all properly executed ballots are indeed counted. Absentee voters concerned about whether their ballots were counted should contact their election officials and ask—records are kept of all absentee voters and whether each ballot was counted.

Where to go for information

Every U.S. installation, unit, embassy and consulate has a Voting Assistance Officer (VAO) trained to provide nonpartisan election information and assistance to all voters. Information is also available on the Army's website for voters (<http://www.vote.army.mil>) and from FVAP staff by phone (1-800-438-VOTE [8683]), fax (1-800-368-8683) or e-mail (vote@fvap.ncr.gov).

Voters can also get information and forms from FVAP's recently redesigned website (<http://www.fvap.gov>). It features a database of state-specific rules and requirements, all relevant dates, links to state election

* Historical Absentee Ballot Use in California, website of California's Secretary of State, http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/hist_absentee.htm.



organizations, federal forms (including a printable, postage-paid envelope for election materials) and even a “form wizard” to help voters fill out forms.

The FVAP provides the Federal Post Card Application (FPCA), which allows voters to register and request an absentee ballot, and the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot, which can be used as a backup ballot for those who do not receive their state ballot on time. All states accept these forms.

As in past elections, the FVAP is working with the U.S. Postal Service and the Military Postal Service Agency to ensure the timely delivery of election materials. Mail sent in postage-paid envelopes will be given priority starting in September and will be treated as express mail in the week before the election.

Electronic election procedures

Election procedures are also being updated to take advantage of new technologies. In past elections, the FVAP has run pilot programs, working with states to expedite the transfer of election materials using elec-

tronic means. Many states allow balloting material to be transmitted electronically by fax or e-mail. The FVAP encourages states to provide electronic transmission of the FPCA for registration and/or absentee ballot request to the local election official, for blank ballot delivery

to the voter, and for the voted ballot delivery to the local election official. The FVAP updates its website accordingly as more and more states begin to offer electronic transmission.

**Exercise the right
you fight for
every day!**

Steps for absentee voting

1. Voters should register as soon as possible. Some states require voters to register 30 days before an election. Many also have websites where voters can check their registration status; the FVAP website links to these state sites.
2. Absentee voters must request an absentee ballot. Election officials need to know who needs absentee ballots and where to send them.
3. When the ballot is received, the voter should follow all ballot instructions carefully and return the ballot in time to meet the state deadline to have it counted. The voter should be sure to place the ballot in the separate security envelope so officials can check the voter’s registration status without viewing the completed ballot itself.
4. Anyone who has not received his or her absentee ballot two to three weeks before the election should complete and submit a Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot to make sure the vote is submitted on time. If a state absentee ballot is subsequently received, the voter should complete and submit that as well—election officials will count only one.
5. After the election, absentee voters can check with election officials to make sure their ballot was received and counted.