

**Number 97, November 2003:
New Letter To Election Officials About Military Voting**

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This is the letter that I have sent to Alabama Secretary of State Nancy L. Worley. I have sent similar letters to the other 50 chief state election officials (CSEOs), including the District of Columbia.

Readers: Please contact your CSEO to reiterate this request, and please contact your local election official (county clerk, etc.) to ask him or her to make every effort to facilitate the enfranchisement of the brave young men and women who are away from home and prepared to lay down their lives in defense of our country. Please ask your local official to complete this questionnaire, for the 2004 presidential election, and return it to me at ROA.

Dear Secretary Worley:

As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the end of the Korean War while fighting the global war on terrorism, please remember the words of President Harry S Truman. In a 1952 letter to Congress (copy available upon request), President Truman wrote:

"About 2,500,000 men and women in the Armed Forces are of voting age at the present time. Many of those in uniform are serving overseas, or in parts of the country distant from their homes. They are unable to return to their states either to register or to vote. Yet these men and women, who are serving their country and in many cases risking their lives, deserve above all others to exercise the right to vote in this election year. At a time when these young people are defending our country and its free institutions, the least we at home can do is to make sure that they are able to enjoy the rights they are being asked to fight to preserve."

Harry S Truman was one of the founders of our association, in 1922. He was a member for more than half of the 20th century. As president, he signed our congressional charter in 1950.

I respectfully suggest that President Truman's words are as true today as they were in 1952, and that those words are addressed to you as an election official. With your help, service members from your state will not have to wait another half-century to enjoy a basic civil right that the rest of us take for granted.

I am writing to ask you to make every effort to get absentee ballots printed and ready to mail by mid-September of next year, so that military personnel and their family members from your state will have time to mark their ballots

and return them on time to be counted, no matter where the service of our country has taken them. I am writing to you now, more than a year before the 2004 presidential election, so that you will have ample time to make the necessary arrangements to meet this deadline.

Progress has been made in recent years, but as we enter the 21st century most states still conduct absentee voting as they did in the 19th century, by snail mail. As you can appreciate, there are three time-consuming steps in the absentee voting process: the transmission of the absentee ballot request from the voter to the election official; the transmission of the unmarked ballot from the election official to the voter; and the transmission of the marked ballot from the voter to the election official. Each of these steps can take weeks if the mails must be used, but only seconds if secure electronic means are authorized.

You will recall the controversy in Florida about disenfranchised military absentee voters during the contentious aftermath of the 2000 presidential election. The 1952 congressional hearings make clear that problem did not start in 2000, and it is not limited to Florida.

I am enclosing a copy of a questionnaire about military absentee voting. The point is to determine the scope of the problem and, more importantly, what needs to be done to correct it (e.g., electronic absentee voting for the military). I would appreciate it if you could distribute this letter, and the questionnaire, to local election officials in your state. Please collect, collate, and report the results back to me by 31 December 2004. We will use this information to communicate with state legislators about the need for reforms in the military absentee voting process. ROA

Smple Letter to Election Official

Dear Election Official:

The contentious aftermath of the 2000 Presidential election, in Florida, brought to light the long-hidden problem that a substantial percentage of the military personnel who try to vote are not, in fact, able to cast ballots that are counted. It is my working hypothesis that the disenfranchisement rate among military voters approaches 50 percent.

In completing this questionnaire, please focus on the applicants who use the federal post card application (FPCA) to apply for absentee ballots. These will be military personnel and family members, both within and outside the United States, as well as American citizens living outside our country. The top line is the number of completed FPCAs that you receive. The bottom line is the number of absentee ballots that you receive on time and count from those FPCA applicants. For example, if you receive 100 completed FPCAs, and if you count 60 absentee ballots from those 100 applicants, then the success rate is 60 percent.

1. The absentee ballot application

- a. How many completed FPCAs did you receive for the 2004 general election? _____
- b. How many of those completed FPCAs did you act on favorably by sending out absentee ballots? _____
- c. How many completed FPCAs did you reject as untimely? _____
- d. How many completed FPCAs did you reject for procedural reasons other than timeliness? _____ What were the most common reasons for rejecting a completed FPCA that was received on time?

Please note that the sum of b, c, and d should equal a.

2. The unmarked absentee ballot

- a. On what date did you start mailing out absentee ballots for the 2004 general election? _____
- b. How many ballots did you mail on that first day? _____
- c. Did you, on that date, mail out ballots to all applicants who had submitted correct FPCAs prior to that date? _____ If not, why not?
- d. How many absentee ballots did you mail out (to FPCA voters) after the first date when you mailed ballots? _____

3. The marked absentee ballot

- a. For the 2004 general election, what was the deadline for the receipt in your office of a mailed-in absentee ballot? _____
- b. Among FPCA applicants, how many absentee ballots did you receive by that deadline and count? _____
- c. Among FPCA applicants, how many absentee ballots arrived after that deadline and were not counted? _____
- d. Among FPCA applicants, how many absentee ballots did not come back at all (as of 30 November 2004)? _____

e. Among FPCA applicants, how many absentee ballots arrived on time but were rejected for other reasons? _____ What were the most common reasons for rejecting absentee ballots that were received on time?

I realize that FPCA applicants constitute a small percentage of your absentee ballot population. You undoubtedly receive absentee ballot requests from college students, business travelers, disabled persons, etc. For that reason, it would be most helpful if you could separate out the FPCA voters in completing this questionnaire.

Please return your questionnaire to me by 1 December 2004. Thank you for your cooperation, and thank you especially for your efforts to facilitate the enfranchisement of the brave young men and women who are away from home and who are prepared to lay down their lives in defense of our country.

*Military title used for purposes of identification only. The views expressed in these articles are the personal views of the author and are not necessarily the views of the Department of the Navy, the Department of Defense, the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.