

MILITARY FAMILIES: Perceptions, Challenges, and Barriers to Voting Participation and Absentee Voting

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE MILITARY
FAMILIES VOTING SURVEY



OVERVIEW

Active duty service members, along with their family members, rely on absentee voting to cast their vote for elections at all levels of government while overseas, deployed, or while stationed in states other than where they are registered. While there is some research surrounding the logistics of absentee voting, not enough is known about the experiences of active duty military and their families with absentee voting.

Through a grant from the Democracy Fund, the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) and the Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) partnered to gather information from military family members about their perceptions, challenges and barriers associated with voting and absentee voting as active duty military members. The objective of this research effort was to gather more information on the motivations, challenges, and perceptions surrounding absentee voting among active duty military and spouses. Literature surrounding this topic gives important insights that drive policy and future research. Existing research shows that members of

the military and their families often encounter barriers such as frequent moves, duty stations in remote locations, and general inconvenience that makes it especially difficult to vote. However, more research is needed specifically around active duty spouse and family absentee voting.

METHOD

Based on the literature review and analysis of existing data, the research team designed a survey instrument aimed at better understanding absentee voting for those in the military, past and present. The survey was disseminated from March 20, 2018 through July 31, 2018 using Qualtrics, marketed on several social media platforms, and circulated via email to listserves of active duty military and veterans. Close to 2,900 responded to the *Military Families Voting Survey* (40% from veterans, 30% from spouses of active duty service members, and 16% from active duty service members). **The findings reported here are from active duty service members and active duty spouses who participated in the survey.**

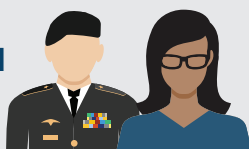


Voting, Motivation, and Process

ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

ABOUT

57% VOTE IN EVERY ELECTION
(federal, state and local)



ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

ONLY

36% VOTE IN EVERY ELECTION
(most spouses vote in presidential elections, but not necessarily in state or local elections)

BELIEVE VOTING IS A CIVIC DUTY



71% OF ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

69% OF ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS



ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS were confident their ballot was counted and 60% indicated it was easy to get voting assistance on or near their installation

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

A similar percentage (64%) were confident their ballot was counted,

BUT ONLY 40% FELT IT WAS EASY TO OBTAIN VOTING INFORMATION

TOP 3 REASONS WHY ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS DID NOT VOTE IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION:

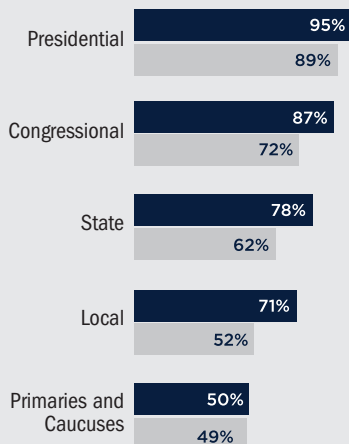
- 1 Did not want to vote
- 2 Had no candidate preference
- 3 Were not interested in voting

TOP 3 REASONS WHY ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS DID NOT VOTE IN THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

- 1 They did not want to vote
- 2 Did not think their vote mattered
- 3 Did not know how to get an absentee ballot

AMONG ALL RESPONDENTS VOTING LIKELIHOOD DECLINES PREDICTABLY BASED ON THE LEVEL OF THE ELECTION

■ ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS ■ ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS



Military Influences

70% OF ACTIVE DUTY MEMBERS FELT THEY WERE ENCOURAGED TO VOTE

- ▶ 27% of their spouses felt encouraged to vote
- ▶ 54% of spouses felt they were neither encouraged nor discouraged

A LARGE MAJORITY OF BOTH ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS AND THEIR SPOUSES FELT MILITARY LEADERS NEITHER INFLUENCED THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF VOTING NOR WHO TO VOTE FOR.

Foreign Interference

Views are mixed on the likelihood of foreign intervention in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election.

ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

- ▶ 48% expressed belief that there was foreign intervention
- ▶ 21% did not believe there was intervention
- ▶ 24% neither agree nor disagree

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

- ▶ 42% expressed belief there was foreign intervention
- ▶ 24% did not believe there was intervention
- ▶ 27% neither agree nor disagree

A MAJORITY INDICATED FOREIGN INTERFERENCE WOULD NOT AFFECT THEIR LIKELIHOOD OF VOTING.

Of those who felt there was interference, 58% of active duty respondents said it did not change their confidence in the voting system.

However, 63% of active duty spouse respondents had less confidence in the voting system.



Absentee Ballot

A MAJORITY OF MILITARY FAMILIES EXPRESSED SATISFACTION WITH THE OVERALL ABSENTEE BALLOT PROCESS (74% OF ACTIVE DUTY AND 66% OF ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS)

83% OF ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

stated they **WOULD NEED AN ABSENTEE BALLOT** “almost every time” or “every time” to vote in every election (federal, state, local) during their time in the military

73% OF ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

92% felt they received their absentee ballot with enough time to return it before the election



HOWEVER

- ▶ 70% did not receive notification their vote was counted
- ▶ 71% did not check the status of their ballot
- ▶ 65% were unaware they could check the status of their ballot

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

87% felt they received their absentee ballot with enough time to return it before the election



HOWEVER

- ▶ 71% did not receive notification their vote was counted
- ▶ 68% did not check the status of their ballot
- ▶ 69% were unaware they could check the status of their ballot

>72%

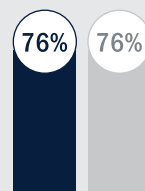
OF ACTIVE DUTY AND SPOUSE RESPONDENTS REQUIRED AN ABSENTEE BALLOT BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT REGISTERED TO VOTE IN THE SAME PLACE THEY RESIDED.

The majority of active duty members and their spouses who participated in the survey did not encounter problems with the absentee voting process while overseas, while deployed, or during a move.

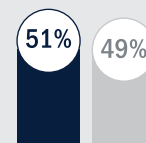
A MAJORITY OF ACTIVE DUTY MEMBERS (86%) AND THEIR SPOUSES (90%) WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY USE THE U.S. MAIL TO SUBMIT THEIR ABSENTEE BALLOTS.



MOST IMPORTANT ASPECTS WHEN USING ABSENTEE BALLOT IN FUTURE ELECTIONS



METHOD THAT IS MOST CONVENIENT

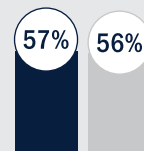


METHOD THAT CANNOT BE CHANGED/TAMPERS WITH/REMOVED IS MOST IMPORTANT

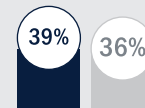
ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

TOP PREFERENCE IN SUBMITTING ABSENTEE OR REMOTE BALLOT



INDICATED A PREFERENCE TO RETURN ELECTRONICALLY ONLINE (E.G., VIA EMAIL OR VIA WEBSITE)



INDICATED A PREFERENCE TO RETURN BY MAIL

ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE ABSENTEE VOTING PROCESS:



MOST MILITARY FAMILY VOTERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY REPORT THEY ARE KNOWLEDGEABLE ABOUT:



- ✔ registering to vote
- ✔ requesting an absentee ballot
- ✔ receiving an absentee ballot
- ✔ completing an absentee ballot
- ✔ returning an absentee ballot



ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS KNOWLEDGEABLE (i.e., rate their knowledge as “good” or “excellent”)

ABOUT

- ▶ how to use a Federal Post Card Application to register and request an absentee ballot (56%)
- ▶ how to use a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot FWAB (43%)
- ▶ knowing key absentee ballot deadlines (52%)

ACTIVE DUTY RESPONDENTS NOT KNOWLEDGEABLE (i.e., rate their knowledge as “fair” or “poor”)

ABOUT

- ▶ how to use a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot FWAB (40%)
- ▶ knowing key absentee ballot deadlines (27%)

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS KNOWLEDGEABLE (i.e., rate their knowledge as “good” or “excellent”)

ABOUT

- ▶ how to use a Federal Post Card Application to register and request an absentee ballot (39%)
- ▶ how to use a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot FWAB (27%)
- ▶ knowing key absentee ballot deadlines (41%)

ACTIVE DUTY SPOUSE RESPONDENTS NOT KNOWLEDGEABLE (i.e., rate their knowledge as “fair” or “poor”)

ABOUT

- ▶ how to use a Federal Write-In Absentee Ballot FWAB (44%)
- ▶ knowing key absentee ballot deadlines (37%)

AMONG THE RESPONSES, AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE ABSENTEE VOTING PROCESS IS ASSOCIATED WITH THE LIKELIHOOD OF VOTING. THIS LENDS SUPPORT TO THE NEED FOR ACTIVE DUTY MILITARY FAMILY REGISTRATION AND VOTING OUTREACH PROGRAMS.



ABOUT THE INSTITUTE FOR VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES (IVMF)

The Institute for Veterans and Military Families (IVMF) is the first interdisciplinary national institute in higher education focused on the social, economic, education, and policy issues impacting veterans and their families. Through its professional staff and experts, the IVMF delivers leading programs in career, vocational, and entrepreneurship education and training, while also conducting actionable research, policy analysis, and program evaluations. The IVMF also supports communities through collective impact efforts that enhance delivery and access to services and care. The Institute, supported by a distinguished advisory board, along with public and private partners, is committed to advancing the lives of those who have served in America's armed forces and their families. For more information, visit ivmf.syracuse.edu.



ABOUT THE MOAA FOUNDATION:

The MOAA foundation, or MOAA Military Family Initiative, is a 501(c)(3) charitable subsidiary of MOAA and supports MOAA programs helping military and veteran families enjoy a quality of life they have earned through their service to our nation. These programs fall within four tracks: career transition, professional education outreach, military spouse professional development, and community outreach. Each year, MOAA programs supported through grants from the MOAA foundation help more than 50,000 military and veteran families. The MOAA foundation is sustained through philanthropic contributions from MOAA members, partner organizations and the general public. For more information visit, www.MOAA.org/foundation.



ABOUT DEMOCRACY FUND

The Democracy Fund is a bipartisan foundation investing in organizations working to ensure the American political system is able to withstand new challenges and deliver on its promise to the American people. Visit www.democracyfund.org to learn more.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study findings can be used to inform efforts at all levels of government involved with improving military absentee voting. Additionally, findings will (1) inform the public about the experiences, motivations, and perceptions of active duty military and their families and (2) shape policy and practice around the issues facing military-connected voters. Based on results, we make the following recommendations.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS:

- ✓ Focus educational messaging around:
 - The topic of “your vote counting” (e.g., encourage military voters to participate by providing explicit information about how their votes are counted)
 - Important dates or events that remind service members and their families to vote (explore the use of technology such as apps to send reminders)
 - How military members and their families can update their voter registration, insuring that it is accurate and up-to-date
 - How to check ballot status
- ✓ Include and prioritize military families in all voting literature and outreach efforts with information that allows and encourages both the service member and military family member to cast votes
- ✓ Execute a broad outreach strategy that relies on multiple channels of communication instead of military community specific outreach
- ✓ Target groups who have traditionally been less likely to participate in elections such as younger, enlisted, and unmarried service members; in addition outreach efforts should target active duty spouses

PROCEDURES:

- ✓ Streamline information for registration process for voters who have relocated
- ✓ Improve ballot receipt notification
- ✓ Undertake minor but high impact procedural initiatives to incentivize voting
- ✓ Examine the feasibility of voting online for active duty families; active duty families indicate a desire for an online voting option

POLICY:

- ✓ States and local election offices should routinely monitor the effects policies have on their military voters, using data to determine if they are disproportionately affected (e.g., how do proof-of-address requirements impact military voters?)
- ✓ Explore the impact of voter registration maintenance on military voters

