ELECTIONS

Action Plans Needed to Fully Address Challenges in Electronic Absentee Voting Initiatives for Military and Overseas Citizens

What GAO Found

Since 2000, DOD has developed several initiatives to facilitate absentee voting by electronic means such as fax or e-mail; however, some of these initiatives exhibited weaknesses or had low participation rates that might hinder their effectiveness. For example, the 2003 Electronic Transmission Service’s fax to e-mail conversion feature allows UOCAVA voters who do not have access to a fax machine to request ballots by e-mail and then converts the e-mails to faxes to send to local election officials. DOD officials told us, however, they have not performed, among other things, certification tests and thus are not in compliance with information security requirements. The 2004 Interim Voting Assistance System (IVAS)—which, DOD reported, enabled UOCAVA voters to request and receive ballots securely—cost $576,000, and 17 citizens received ballots through it. The 2006 Integrated Voting Alternative Site (also called IVAS)—which enabled voters to request ballots using one tool, by mail, fax, or unsecured e-mail—raised concerns, from Congress and others, that using unsecured e-mail could expose voters to identity theft if they transmit personal data. While this IVAS displayed a warning that voters had to read to proceed, it did not advise them to delete personal voting information from the computers they used. DOD spent $1.1 million, and at least eight voted ballots were linked to this 2006 IVAS. Both the 2004 and 2006 IVAS were each implemented just 2 months before an election. DOD also has a Web site with links to guidance on electronic transmission options, but some of this guidance was inconsistent and could be misleading. DOD officials acknowledged the discrepancies and addressed them during GAO’s review.

The Election Assistance Commission has not developed the Internet absentee voting guidelines for DOD’s use, and thus DOD has not proceeded with its Internet-based absentee voting demonstration project. Commission officials told GAO that they had not developed the guidelines because they had been devoting constrained resources to other priorities, including challenges associated with electronic voting machines. Furthermore, they have not established—in conjunction with major stakeholders like DOD—tasks, milestones, and time frames for completing the guidelines. The absence of such guidelines has hindered DOD’s development of its Internet-based demonstration project. To assist the Commission, however, DOD has shared information on the challenges it faced in implementing prior Internet projects—including security threats.

GAO observed that DOD was developing, but had not yet completed, plans for expanding the future use of electronic voting technologies. Because electronic voting in federal elections involves numerous federal, state, and local-level stakeholders; emerging technology; and time to establish the initiatives, developing results-oriented plans that identify goals, time frames, and tasks—including addressing security issues—is key. Without such plans, DOD is not in a position to address congressional expectations to establish secure and private electronic and Internet-based voting initiatives.

What GAO Recommends

GAO made recommendations to DOD regarding security, guidance, and plans for electronic voting initiatives and to the Commission on plans to develop the guidelines. DOD and the Commission agreed with these recommendations.


To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Derek Stewart at (202) 512-5559 or StewartD@gao.gov.