

Highlights of GAO-16-378, a report to congressional addressees

April 2016

## ELECTIONS

### DOD Needs More Comprehensive Planning to Address Military and Overseas Absentee Voting Challenges

#### Why GAO Did This Study

The Uniformed and Overseas Citizens Absentee Voting Act generally protects the rights of military personnel and overseas citizens to register and vote absentee in federal elections. In 2014, the most recently completed federal election, the Election Assistance Commission estimated that around 6 percent, or 8,500 of the 146,000 ballots submitted by voters covered under the act, were rejected. DOD's Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) generally implements many of the act's provisions and provides absentee voting support.

GAO was asked to review matters related to FVAP. GAO assesses the extent to which DOD has (1) identified challenges with its military and overseas voting assistance efforts and developed plans to address those challenges, and (2) implemented strategic planning practices to help ensure the long-term effectiveness of FVAP. GAO reviewed 2010-14 post-election surveys, 2014-15 DOD-commissioned studies, and compared documentation of FVAP plans with leading federal strategic planning practices; and interviewed FVAP officials and program stakeholders.

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOD establish time frames for actions FVAP identified to address challenges, fully implement the selected leading practices of federal strategic planning into its day-to-day operations, and develop a strategic plan that fully exhibits the six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. DOD generally concurred with GAO's recommendations.

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#### What GAO Found

The Department of Defense (DOD), through its Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP), has taken steps to identify challenges and needed improvements to its military and overseas absentee voting assistance efforts. However, two long-standing issues—limited awareness of resources for voters and the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots—continue to pose challenges. DOD-commissioned studies and post-election survey results indicate that there is limited awareness of FVAP's resources among military and overseas voters. A 2015 study found, for example, that the online availability of blank ballots led to one of the most significant improvements in military and overseas absentee voting. At the same time, the full benefits of the improvement had not been realized because voters remained unaware that ballots could be requested online. Regarding the unpredictable postal delivery of absentee ballots, the timeliness of a voter's receipt or return of an absentee ballot depends on a number of variables, such as the mode and speed of transportation used to transmit mail. DOD has identified actions that it will take to address these and other issues. However, these challenges persist, in part, because DOD has not established time frames for completing the actions it has identified.

DOD's implementation of FVAP partially exhibits six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning. As shown below, the program exhibits some, but not all, of the characteristics that make up each practice.

Six selected leading practices of federal strategic planning	Partial implementation of practice
Define the mission and goals	FVAP has revised its mission, purpose, and strategic goals, but has not made them publicly available
Define strategies that address management challenges and identify resources needed to achieve goals	DOD has identified challenges and some actions, but not fully identified strategies and resources to address challenges associated with postal delivery of ballots
Ensure leadership involvement and accountability	Leadership of FVAP has stabilized, but DOD has not fully established and institutionalized mechanisms to help ensure the accountability of the FVAP leadership
Involve stakeholders	DOD communicates with stakeholders, but has not fully involved all of its stakeholders in the development of the program's mission and goals
Coordinate with other federal agencies	DOD coordinates with other federal agencies, but did not fully include them in the development of the program's mission, goals, and strategies
Develop and use performance measures	DOD uses some performance metrics, but does not use metrics to evaluate FVAP's progress toward achieving its goals

Source: GAO Analysis of DOD data. | GAO-16-378

According to officials, as of February 2016, DOD did not have a long-term, comprehensive strategy, such as a strategic plan, for its voting assistance program, to institutionalize existing practices and establish accountability for efforts that need further development—such as those related to the partially exhibited leading practices identified. Without a comprehensive strategic plan that institutionalizes a long-term vision, it will be difficult for FVAP to respond to the dynamic nature of the voting environment and frequent turnover in program leadership, and to demonstrate progress in addressing its long-standing challenges.