



Highlights of [GAO-06-1134T](#), a report to the Committee on Armed Services, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The narrow margin of victory in the 2000 presidential election raised concerns about the extent to which members of the military and their dependents living abroad were able to vote via absentee ballot. In September 2001, GAO made recommendations to address variances in the Department of Defense's (DOD) Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP). Along with the military services, FVAP is responsible for educating and assisting military personnel in the absentee voting process. Leading up to the 2004 presidential election, Members of Congress raised concerns about efforts under FVAP to facilitate absentee voting.

This testimony, which draws on prior GAO work, addresses three questions: (1) How did FVAP's assistance efforts differ between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections? (2) What actions did DOD take in response to prior GAO recommendations on absentee voting? and (3) What challenges remain in providing voting assistance to military personnel?

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-1134T.

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

ELECTIONS

DOD Expands Voting Assistance to Military Absentee Voters, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

For the 2004 presidential election, FVAP expanded its efforts beyond those taken for the 2000 election to facilitate absentee voting by military personnel. FVAP distributed more absentee voting materials and improved the accessibility of its Web site, which includes voting information. Also, FVAP conducted 102 more voting training workshops than it did for the 2000 election, and it provided an online training course for Voting Assistance Officers (VAO). FVAP also designed an electronic version of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot—an emergency ballot accepted by all states and territories—although its availability was not announced until a few weeks before the election. In assessing its efforts for the 2004 election, using data from its postelection surveys, FVAP attributed increased voter participation rates to an effective voter information and education program. However, in light of low survey response rates, FVAP's estimates and conclusions should be interpreted with caution.

DOD has taken actions in response to GAO's prior recommendations regarding voting assistance to servicemembers. In 2001, GAO recommended that DOD revise its voting guidance, improve program oversight, and increase command emphasis to reduce the variance in voting assistance to military servicemembers. Prior to the 2004 presidential election, DOD implemented corrective actions that addressed GAO's recommendations. Specifically, the services revised their voting guidance and enhanced oversight of the military's voting assistance program, and emphasis on voting education and awareness increased throughout the top levels of command within DOD. However, the level of assistance continued to vary at the installations GAO visited. Because the VAO role is a collateral duty and VAOs' understanding and interest in the voting process differ, some variance in voting assistance may always exist. DOD plans to continue its efforts to improve absentee voting assistance.

Despite efforts of DOD and the states, GAO's April 2006 report identified two major challenges that remain in providing voting assistance to military personnel: (1) simplifying and standardizing the time-consuming and multi-step absentee voting process, which includes different requirements and time frames for each state; and (2) developing and implementing a secure electronic registration and voting system. FVAP attempted to make the absentee voting process easier by using its Legislative Initiatives program to encourage states to simplify the multi-step process and standardize their absentee voting requirements. However, the majority of states have not agreed to any new initiatives since FVAP's 2001 report on the 2000 election. FVAP is limited in its ability to affect state voting procedures because it lacks the authority to require states to take action on absentee voting initiatives. For the 2004 election, FVAP developed an electronic registration and voting experiment. However, it was not used by any voters due to concerns about the security of the system. Because DOD did not want to call into question the integrity of votes that would have been cast via the system, they decided to shut the experiment down prior to its use by any absentee voters. Some technologies—such as faxing, e-mail and the Internet—have been used to improve communication between local jurisdictions and voters.