



Highlights of [GAO-06-521](#), a report to congressional addressees

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, their dependents, and U.S. citizens 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 and the Department of State (DOS), FVAP is responsible for educating and assisting military personnel and overseas citizens 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. Because of broad Congressional interest, GAO initiated a review under the Comptroller General's authority to address three questions: (1) How did FVAP's assistance efforts differ between the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections? (2) What actions did DOD and DOS take in response to prior GAO recommendations on absentee voting? and (3) What challenges remain in providing voting assistance to military personnel and overseas citizens? This review is one of several GAO reviews related to various aspects of the 2004 election.

GAO provided DOD and DOS with a draft of this report for comment, and they both generally concurred with the report's contents.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-06-521.

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

Absentee Voting Assistance to Military and Overseas Citizens Increased for the 2004 General Election, but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

For the 2004 presidential election, FVAP expanded its efforts beyond those taken for the 2000 election to provide military personnel and overseas citizens tools needed to vote by absentee ballot. With 13 full-time staff members and a fiscal year 2004 budget of about \$6 million, FVAP distributed more voting materials and modified its Web site, which includes absentee voting information, and made it accessible to more military and overseas citizens worldwide. It also added an online voting assistance training program and an online version of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot. FVAP also conducted 164 voting training workshops for military servicemembers and overseas citizens, as compared to 62 workshops for the 2000 election. In its 2005 report on the effectiveness of its federal voting assistance program, on the basis of its postelection surveys, FVAP attributed higher 2004 voter participation rates to the effective implementation of its voter outreach program. However, because of low survey response rates, GAO has concerns about FVAP's ability to project changes in voter participation rates between the 2000 and 2004 elections.

In 2001, GAO recommended that DOD and DOS revise their voting guidance, improve program oversight, and increase command emphasis to reduce the variance in voting assistance to military servicemembers and overseas citizens. DOD and DOS took actions to implement these recommendations; however, absentee voting assistance continued to vary. Voting Assistance Officers (VAOs) provide voting assistance as a collateral duty. Because of competing demands on VAOs and differences in their understanding and interest in the voting process, some variance in absentee voting assistance may always exist. DOD and DOS plan to continue their efforts to improve absentee voting assistance.

Despite the efforts of FVAP, DOD, and DOS, GAO identified three challenges that remain in providing absentee voting assistance to military personnel and overseas citizens. One challenge involves simplifying and standardizing the time-consuming, multistep absentee voting process, which has different requirements and time frames established by each state. In attempting to simplify and standardize the absentee voting process, FVAP continued working with the states through its Legislative Initiatives program to facilitate absentee voting for military servicemembers and overseas citizens. Another challenge involves efforts to implement an electronic registration and voting system given persistent issues regarding security and privacy. For the 2004 election, FVAP developed an electronic voting experiment that it planned to make available to the entire military, their dependents, and overseas citizens; however, the experiment was never implemented because of security concerns publicly raised by four of the ten members of a peer review group. A challenge for DOS is having the ability to reach all overseas citizens. Overseas citizens are not required to provide contact information to an embassy or consulate. If these citizens do not provide appropriate contact information, DOS cannot proactively reach these overseas voters.