

GETTING MILITARY BALLOTS COUNTED

Washington Times

September 2, 2001

The New York Times' massive analysis of overseas military absentee ballots in Florida raised serious questions about the fairness of the vote-counting process. According to the Times, some military personnel filled out ballots after the Nov. 7 election, and Bush officials worked to ensure that questionable ballots would be accepted in pro-Bush counties and rejected in pro-Gore counties. Back in December, Republicans made the contrary argument: Democrats tried to get overseas military ballots thrown out on technicalities in order to benefit Al Gore, effectively disenfranchising the men and women who defend our country.

Both of these storylines have some validity. There is little doubt that some overseas military ballots were treated arbitrarily; some valid votes were thrown out on technicalities, and some invalid votes were counted. But the real danger is not the Democrats or Republicans jockeying for electoral advantage. Rather it is the underlying problem that military and overseas voters are effectively denied a right that most Americans take for granted: the ability to cast a secret ballot at a polling place. A large number of military personnel, and all overseas personnel, must rely exclusively on the absentee ballot system, which falls short of the polling place in several important respects. Polling places guarantee the secret ballot, limit fraudulent voting and provide a sense of communal participation. Absentee voting does not.

The most significant disadvantage of the absentee ballot is that it is not a secret ballot. When you are mailed an absentee ballot, what is to stop your boss, spouse, church, union or co-worker from looking over your shoulder and pressuring you to vote one way or another?

Most Americans may discount this kind of pressure, but it was the unscrupulous practices of the political machines of the 19th century that drove us to adopt the secret ballot. Back then, some cities employed ballots that were color coded by party. If you took the wrong ballot, everyone in the room would know, and you might find yourself out of a job the next day.

The secret ballot at the polling place eliminated this kind of coercion, because once you enter a polling booth you can thumb your nose at those who would influence your vote.

The polling place is also more resistant to fraud. There is a voter check in, and no need for complicated witnessing or signature procedures that many cause absentee ballots to be thrown out. Polling places do not depend on the vagaries of mail delivery.

Also, there is a sense of civic community associated with polling places, as individuals gather with fellow citizens to elect public officials. Absentee voting is solitary.

Of course, those who are unable to go to the polls because of disability or out-of-town status should have easy access to absentee ballots. But we should not relegate voters to the absentee ballot system if we can give them access to a polling place. So how could overseas and military voters take advantage of a polling place if they are unable to get back to their home precincts?

First, let domestic military bases serve as polling places. Historically, some domestic bases, particularly those in remote areas, have offered the use of their facilities to localities as polling places. But in 1999, the Department of Defense issued an overly strict directive to prevent such use, arguing that polling places at military installations might intimidate voters.

A bill introduced by Rep. Bill Thomas, California Republican, would allow such use. The same bill passed the House last year with

John C. Fortier is a research associate at AEI.

bipartisan support before dying in the Senate. This reform would make in-person voting more convenient for military personnel who live on base and for nearby residents. It would also give localities more options for situating their polling places.

Second, encourage large overseas military installations and diplomatic postings to host polling places. These polling places would be different from the traditional polling place in that voters would cast their votes in many different precincts and states.

The polling place could receive absentee ballots requested by overseas personnel and provide them with a private voting booth to cast their ballots. The polling place could check the identification of the voter, ensure that the voter secured the proper witness signatures, place a postmark on the envelope, and expedite delivery to the appropriate jurisdiction.

Given state deadlines and the need to mail ballots, these polling places could be opened for two to three weeks before election day, much like early voting booths that some states employ. Of course, there would be obstacles to setting up such sites: different state regulations, logistical details of witnessing and delivery, and cost. But the Department of Defense's Federal Voter Assistance Program, which specializes in assisting military voters, could play a leading role. Perhaps some of the grant money proposed by the various electoral reform bills in Congress could flow to FVAP to institute a pilot program.

There are numerous problems with our electoral system, many of which will be debated in this session of Congress. The issue of military and overseas voters should not be forgotten. Let us hope that in the next presidential election, military and overseas voters will be able to exercise the basic rights of casting a secret ballot at a polling place and having that vote count.

