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VOTING CAN BE A REAL BATTLE FOR U.S. TROOPS AND OTHERS OVERSEAS IN THE 2008 PRIMARIES

New Report from The Century Foundation Explores Problems Facing Military and Overseas Voters and Offers Ideas for Assuring Their Rights

29 November 2007, New York City — U.S. Troops in Iraq and other places around the world are center stage in this year's presidential elections. But when it comes to casting votes for the candidates, American soldiers and other U.S. citizens living abroad often face daunting obstacles. A new report from The Century Foundation sheds light on this problem, which has received surprisingly little public attention. It also warns that with a frontloaded primary system and a large number of caucuses, U.S. military personnel and other citizens living abroad could find it more difficult than ever to have their votes count.

In "Bringing Voting Rights to Military and Overseas Voters," report author Tova Wang, Democracy Fellow at The Century Foundation, explains how difficult it is for military and overseas voters to vote, examines the problems encountered in making sure that their votes are counted, and suggests reforms for both easing the procedural problems and improving turnout among this often neglected group of voters.

According to the report, a survey by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission (EAC) showed that only 5.5 percent of eligible military and overseas voters actually participated successfully in the 2006 election. The EAC survey and reports by the Department of Defense indicate that the most common reasons for the rejection of a military or overseas ballot is that it is received past the deadline or that the requested ballot sent to the voter is returned as undeliverable because the voter—who could be in a war zone—has moved from his or her previous location. Earlier studies have found that many overseas and military voters did not vote in the 2000 election because they received their absentee ballot too late or had not received it at all.

The Department of Defense and State Department have detailed programs for assisting soldiers and other overseas voters with registration and ballots. However, state laws vary tremendously regarding these voters, creating further confusion about registration deadlines, the date by which ballots need to be received, and whether or not ballots could be faxed or e-mailed.

According to the report, the biggest problem confronting overseas and military voters in the 2008 nominating system is the caucuses. More than one third of the states plan to have a nominating

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The Century Foundation conducts public policy research and analyses of economic, social, and foreign policy issues, including inequality, retirement security, election reform, media studies, homeland security, and international affairs. The foundation produces books, reports, and other publications, convenes task forces and working groups, and operates seven informational Web sites. With offices in New York City and Washington, D.C., The Century Foundation is nonprofit and nonpartisan and was founded in 1919 by Edward A. Filene.

contest that is a caucus or convention for at least one of the two parties. Caucuses do not allow absentee ballots, and mandate personal attendance. As a consequence, they completely exclude members of the armed services stationed overseas or away from home within the United States, voters who are working or studying abroad, and voters fulfilling government contracts, such as for the Department of Defense, the State Department, or USAID; similarly, the families of these individuals living away from home also cannot participate.

Wang reports that the second biggest problem facing military and overseas voters is the push to hold primaries and caucuses ever earlier. Voter registration and ballot requests are now competing with holiday mail. Registration deadlines for overseas and military voters for the 2008 primaries are as early as December 10 in Washington, D.C.

In the report, Wang offers recommendations to improve access to voting and participation rates of military and overseas voters:

- State parties should allow absentee voting for military and overseas voters in caucuses.
- Overseas voter organizations ought to sponsor Internet-based candidate debates specifically directed at overseas voters, modeled on previous successful online debate formats.
- The parties should engage in the same types of get out the vote efforts for overseas voters as they do for absentee voters in the United States. For example, the parties could minimally target their most loyal members who they can identify as currently residing overseas and send them e-mail and mail reminders, information on how to effectively cast a ballot, and deadline dates for their state; send them the FPCA form that they can use to register and request an absentee ballot, which is available on line on the FVAP Web site with state-specific instructions; and even send them and e-mail them copies of the Federal Write-in Absentee Ballot.
- The post office should be allowed to forward voting materials for overseas voters.
- Greater use should be made of computer technology and the Internet for distributing information about voting procedures and deadlines and, moving toward a secure system through which soldiers and other overseas voters could register and receive ballots online.

“The disenfranchisement of military and overseas voters has not been a core issue for many voting rights organizations and has been discussed little in the media,” writes Wang. “These voters are often at the frontlines of American foreign engagement, whether on the battle field or building infrastructure in a war-torn region in Africa or undertaking any other activity overseas. They bring a special perspective to the democratic process and we need to assure that their voices are heard.”

Tova Wang is available to discuss this report and other issues related to the primaries and election reform in general. This report/brief and others in the series can be downloaded from www.tcf.org or www.reformelections.org, The Century Foundation’s election reform project site. Contact Christy Hicks at hicks@tcf.org or 212-452-7723 for more information.