

Marines at the Ballot Box

A leader's guide to speaking with Marines about voting

by Maj Lucas Helms

Marines do not vote. While some Marines may show up to the polling booth on election day or mail in their absentee ballots, in aggregate, the Marine Corps has an abysmal record of exercising individual voting rights. During the 2020 presidential elections, only 37 percent of active-duty Marines cast a vote, whereas the Navy saw 54 percent of its active-duty sailors vote (see Figure 1). By comparison, an estimated 74 percent of civilians voted, when adjusted to match DOD's demographics.¹ Why is it that we, as a duty-bound and honor-driven force, only voted two-thirds as often as the Navy and half as frequently as our civilian counterparts?

The 2020 federal election saw enormous voter turnout across the country. Yet, the armed forces, and the Marine Corps specifically, lagged far behind the civilian populace. This trend is not unique to 2020. Over the past five federal elections, the Marine Corps has steadily fallen farther behind our sister Services in terms of both absolute turnout and turnout compared to the civilian populace (see Figure 2). Not only are we bad about voting but we are also getting worse. This article outlines some of the oft-cited reasons people do not vote and provides talking points on each to allow leaders to apolitically encourage their Marines to take part in the electoral system.

Why Don't We Vote?

Following each federal election, the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) administers a survey to all active-duty service members to solicit feedback about their voting experience. From these surveys, we learn several things. First, in the 2020 federal election, 85 percent of service members in the United States reported being over

>Maj Helms is an Intelligence Officer currently in the education phase of the Commandant's Strategist Program. As a PhD candidate at Vanderbilt University, he studies American politics focusing on the interaction between the Department of Defense and the United States Congress. His deployments include two Operation IRAQI FREEDOM tours, two MEU deployments, and one Theater Security Cooperation deployment. He has also served as a Defense Congressional Fellow and as a Marine Liaison Officer to the U.S. House of Representatives.

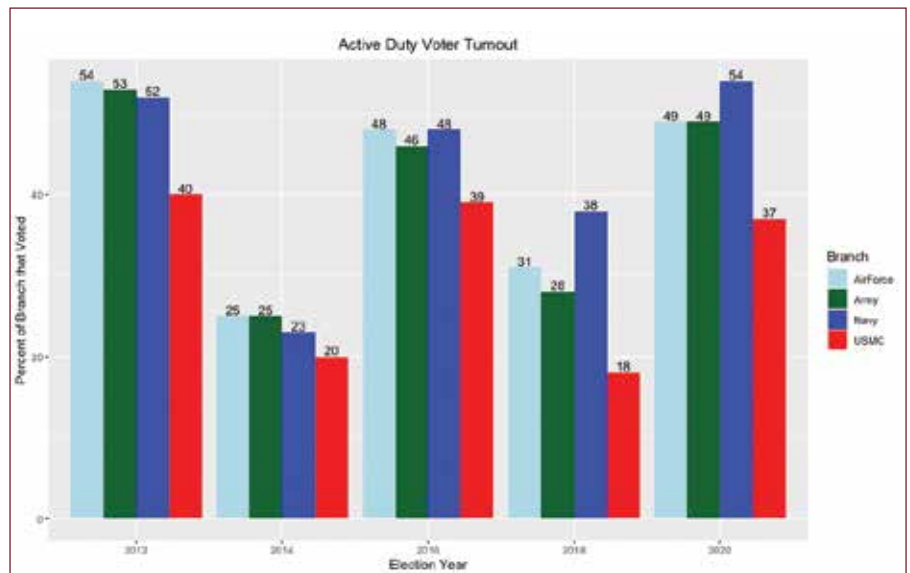


Figure 1. (Figure provided by author.)

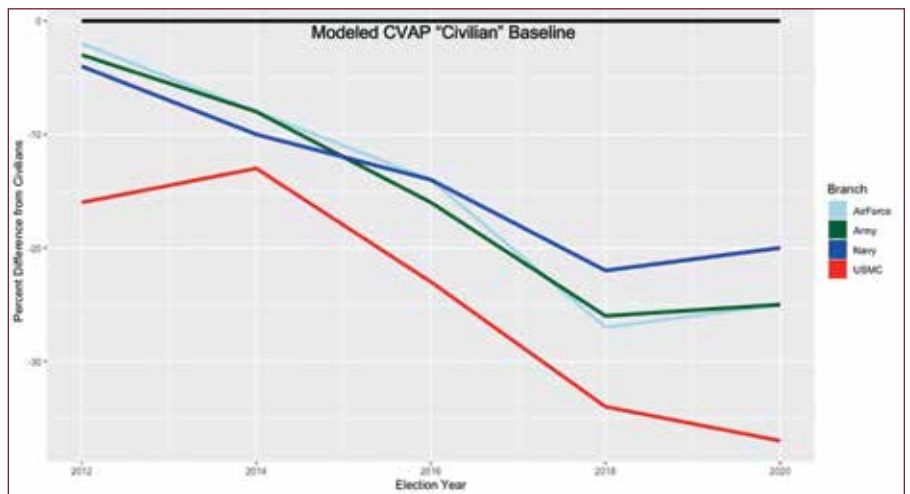


Figure 2. (Figure provided by author.)

50 miles from their registered voting address, indicating they were likely eligible to vote absentee.² FVAP estimates that over half of those who were eligible to vote absentee, but did not vote, were hindered by what is referred to as an “obstacle gap” consisting of administrative or technical hindrances to voting. The remaining non-voters fall into what is referred to as the “residual gap” consisting of factors related to motivation and interest in voting.³ While the FVAP specifically reports on these gaps in relation to the overseas voting population, many of the same hindrances exist among stateside absentee voters.

The obstacle gap absentee voters face consists of difficulties created by the absentee voting process itself. Challenges include the process of obtaining an absentee ballot, difficulty in finding information on candidates and election-related materials, delays in the mail system, and other issues. These are legitimate challenges but not insurmountable, especially given the voting resources commands have at their disposal. The Marine Corps Voting Assistance Program, directed by *MCO 1742.IC*, directs the establishment of a voting assistance program in all installations and commands; this program creates the structure and resources necessary to help Marines overcome the obstacle gap. The Marine Corps has Installation Voting Assistance Officers at 19 Marine Corps installations worldwide and dedicated voting assistance officers in approximately 1,100 commands. Deployed and overseas voting assistance programs appear to be much more robust than those of stateside units, even though the vast majority of Marines in stateside commands are eligible to vote absentee. Commanders must realize the potential impact of their Voting Assistance Program, regardless of location. As many as 80,000 Marines fell victim to the obstacle gap in 2020 despite commanders having the requirement to support them. This is unacceptable.

The residual gap is much harder to define, and no formal program can fix it. Rather, it is up to leaders at all levels to address. An analysis of the post-election FVAP survey and a review of the academic literature regarding U.S.

voter turnout reveals a variety of reasons that active-duty service members may choose not to vote:

- **Apathy:** Many active-duty service members simply express low or no interest in voting.
- **Conflict of Interest:** Some service members express feelings of moral conflict as public servants voicing preferences about national leaders.
- **Civic Duty:** Many see voting as a choice, not a civic duty. Some may feel that they are fulfilling their civic duty through uniformed service and therefore do not need to vote.
- **Disconnected:** Living away from where they are registered to vote, service members may not see the first-hand impact of their vote or have strong opinions about the government back home.
- **Broken System:** Some service members simply do not want to participate in an electoral system they perceive as broken.
- **Vote Does Not Count:** Many feel that their single vote does not matter, either in terms of sheer numbers or in terms of their political affiliation where they are registered.

Addressing the Problem

Commands can fix the obstacle gap by prioritizing and energizing their Voting Assistance Programs. It is incumbent upon commanders to understand that these obstacles are legitimate but can be successfully overcome by all Marines under their watch when provided the appropriate time and resources. As for the residual gap, it is up to leaders at all levels to educate, discuss, and encourage their Marines to participate. Below are counterpoints to the six primary reasons Marines may decide not to vote. Leaders are encouraged to draw on these points as they discuss voting with their Marines.

Apathy. As Americans, we are blessed to live in the most successful experiment of self-governance in all of human history. Since the founding of this nation, tens of millions of people have been killed worldwide in attempts to impose a non-democratic rule on populations, often at the hands of their own government. America is special in that

we practice a form of government that allows citizens to select their own leaders. We are the only major country in the world to have experienced a peaceful transition of power between leaders since its founding almost 250 years ago. It is a privilege to participate in this form of government—one we should be excited about and appreciative of. Moreover, the outcome is not the only reason to vote: Exercising the fundamental privilege so many of our brothers and sisters have died for, a privilege we have sworn to put our life on the line for, is something we should take seriously. Finally, a vote does not just choose the people who hold office in Washington D.C.—state and local elections are often decided on the very same ballots. It is easy to think of elections only in terms of the President and members of Congress; however, state and local officials arguably have more impact on daily life than these federal offices. These local officials are the people that set city and state tax rates, write and enforce municipal laws, decide what curriculum is taught in public schools, determine a city’s spending priorities, and many other factors that impact daily life for our families back home. We should care about the rules we live under, and elections are the primary way to influence those rules.

Conflict of interest. Grant, Patton, Marshall, Eisenhower, Petraeus, and a slew of other prominent military figures have publicly chosen not to participate in national elections. Patton explained his decision by saying, “I am in the pay of the United States government. If I vote against the administration, I am voting against my commander in chief. If I vote for the administration in office I am being bought.”⁴ A conscious decision along these lines to abstain from voting is understandable at the federal-government level. However, this argument holds no water at the state or municipal level. Given that most states and municipalities elect at least some, if not all, of their officials on the same ballot as the bi-annual federal elections, service members should feel no conflict in voting “down ballot.” There is no requirement to vote for every position up for election on the ballot. In fact, it

is perfectly reasonable to skip voting for the President, Senators, and Representatives, choosing instead to vote only for those one has the moral certainty and strength of conviction to support. As members of the DOD, there is no inherent conflict of interest in voting in state, county, or municipal elections.⁵

Civic Duty. Political philosophers and pundits have a variety of ways to think about civic duty, but in essence, they all boil down to: “What are the obligations a citizen owes to their government or society?” Regardless of where one falls on this question, the fact that a service member has voluntarily chosen to defend their country in uniform has traditionally indicated a strong sense of civic duty. It is strange then, that so many service members do not consider voting to be a civic duty. In fact, less than half of those surveyed thought voting was a civic duty at all—most viewed it as simply a choice. A service member’s sense of civic duty is strongly correlated to their likelihood of voting. The 2016 post-election survey of active-duty service members reveals that only 28 percent of service members who voted believed it was purely a personal choice, while 74 percent of service members who voted believed it was primarily a civic duty.⁶ Importantly, statistical analysis of survey data shows that activating one’s belief in their civic duty may be up to ten times more effective at improving voter turnout than increasing one’s interest in the election—leaders take note.

Disconnected. Many service members who are stationed away from home simply do not see the first-hand impact of their vote. It is easy to forget that those back home are living with the choices we make at the ballot box. It is important to consider family members, friends, colleagues, social groups, etc. when making voting decisions. Even though we may not be physically present to observe the function of the local and state government, those we care about must live with the consequences of each election. This is our opportunity to shape their community and to prepare that community for what we want it to be when we return. Think state taxes are too high? Vote for state representatives

who have pledged to lower them. Want more social services in your town? Vote for a mayor who seeks to increase community support services. Think the law is applied unfairly in your county? Vote for a new sheriff whose views align more closely with your own. The decisions these local elected officials make directly impact our loved ones and create the environment we will return home to after separating from the Service.

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Broken System. It is easy to turn on the news or scroll through a social media feed and become discouraged by the state of politics in our country. Infighting, personal attacks, and vitriol seem to characterize the state of political discourse in our country at the moment. Consider the following three observations:

- The federal government is supposed to be slow. Our bi-cameral, tri-branch system was deliberately designed to make passing new laws difficult. Just because it looks like nothing gets done, does not mean this is a bad thing. Gridlock was deliberately built into our federal system of government. Failed legislation, presidential vetoes, and Supreme Court challenges are all part of the process to ensure that a tyrannical government cannot emerge and force its will on the people and that temporary hot topics do not immediately result in reactionary permanent changes to our system.
- Political rhetoric seems bad now, but it has always been bad. For centuries, fearmongering and exaggerating about the state of affairs have been the norm. The presidential election in 1800 (only the fourth in our country’s history) saw incumbent President John Adams attack challenger Thomas Jefferson, saying electing Jefferson would result in “Murder,

robbery, rape, adultery and incest (being) openly taught and practiced, the air will be rent with the cries of the distressed, the soil will be soaked with blood and the nation black with crimes.”⁷ Variations of these same accusations are still in use 220 years later.

• Watching from the sidelines is akin to accepting the status quo. Choosing to abstain from the political process is the same as being padded up for the football game but refusing to go in for a play because we do not like how the game is going. We are each given the ability to weigh in and assert our opinion about the direction of our government at all levels. Keeping our preferences to ourselves, complaining about the system, or refusing to participate does not change anything—it only enables more of the same and makes our own preferences subservient to those who turn out to vote.

Vote Does Not Count. Of all these concerns, this is the most easily assuaged with hard data. National offices are sometimes decided by margins so slim that more Marines voting could have changed the outcome. In 2020 alone, two members of Congress were elected under such circumstances. Representative Mariannette Miller-Meeks defeated Rita Hart in Iowa’s Second Congressional District by a mere six votes. Averaging the number of Marines across each congressional district nationwide and coupling this with Marine voter turnout rates, this means that about 270 Marines are registered to vote in that district who *did not* vote in that election. Had Marines voted at the same rate as the DOD average, 43 more would have voted, far more than is needed to swing that race. Similarly, In New York’s 22nd Congressional District, Representative Claudia Tenney defeated Anthony Brindisi by 109 votes. Again, Marines had the potential to directly alter this election: voting at the same rate as our civilian counterparts would have created an additional 159 votes cast in this district.⁸ At the state level, more cases arise: In the last three elections alone, at least thirteen state senators and representatives won their seats by margins narrow enough to have been swung by Marines voting

at turnout rates commensurate with their civilian counterparts. Further, hundreds of local elections are won by margins in the single and double digits each year, each with the potential to be swayed by the active-duty population. Individual votes can and do regularly impact the state and local officials who exercise direct control over our communities.

A Call to Action

The next Federal Elections are on Tuesday, 5 November 2024. During the 2020 presidential election, a mere 37 percent of Marines cast ballots—we must do better this time. In addition to reinvigorating the voting assistance program, leaders are encouraged to actively discuss voting with their Marines early in the election cycle. Help educate them on the voting process. Empower the voting assistance officer to clear hurdles created by the obstacle gap (Remember, over 80 percent of Marines are eligible to vote absentee and many will need the support of a voting assistance officer to complete the process on time). Schedule time for locally registered Marines to vote in person on election day. Address concerns about the electoral system. Assuage fears. Clear up confusion.

Most importantly, we must impress on our Marines the potential impact of

their participation and activate their sense of civic duty to take part in our democracy. Leaders know their Marines and where they hail from—tailoring conversations to the individual helps change voting from something perfunctory to something personal. Leaders at all levels need to be vocal and engaged on this topic. Marines have led the way across all walks of military service—it is time we stepped up and participated in the electoral process with the same enthusiasm we approach the rest of our duties.

Notes

1. The FVAP derives this sample population by examining the Citizen Voting Age Population and then extracting a demographically similar population by adjusting for factors such as age, gender, education, and mobility. The resulting “modeled Citizen Voting Age Population” allows us to directly compare voting rates between active-duty military and the portion of the civilian population that closely matches DOD’s demographics. This process results in a reliable estimate of relative voter turnout in a specific year, but because of variance in how these populations are derived during each election, year-to-year comparisons yield less accuracy. It is also important to note that the modeled Citizen Voting Age Population is adjusted to the active component of DOD as a whole: As such, these comparisons may be slightly skewed given the Marine Corps’ service-specific demographics.

2. Federal Voting Assistance Program, *Post-Election Voting Survey: Active-Duty Military—Technical Report*, (Washington, DC: DOD, 2020).

3. Federal Voting Assistance Program, *Report to Congress. Observations from the 2020 General Election*, (Washington, DC: DOD, 2020).

4. Alden Hatch, *George Patton: The General Wore Spurs* (New York: Julian Messner In, 1950).

5. Members of the National Guard may feel conflicted about voting in state elections but should not find conflict in voting below the state level.

6. *Post-Election Voting Survey*.

7. Ron Grossman, “The Deplorable History of U.S. Campaign Mudslinging,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 30, 2016, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/commentary/ct-campaign-mud-slinging-history-flashback-perspec-1002-md-20160930-story.html>.

8. The author is not advocating that Marines *should* or *would* have altered the outcome of either race, merely that a higher Marine turnout had the *ability* to alter this race. At the individual level, we should all recognize that our vote matters.

