

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

November 5, 2012

The Honorable Leon E. Panetta  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Secretary Panetta:

We write to express concerns over another serious failure by the Department of Defense (DoD) to safeguard the voting rights of our overseas military service members, which we believe could result in the imminent disenfranchisement of thousands. In the 2010 election, DoD's Military Postal Service Agency (MPSA) documented widespread problems experienced by overseas military voters, and then made a series of formal recommendations to DoD to fix them. It has come to our attention that DoD has failed to implement the MPSA's top recommendations to modernize the system for redirecting (i.e., forwarding) blank ballots and that, as a result, a large number of service members are unlikely to receive their ballots in time to vote this year.

Our overseas service members face longstanding obstacles to their participation in elections. For decades, one of their greatest hurdles has been actually getting their hands on their blank absentee ballots in a timely manner prior to Election Day. Because our service members move regularly between U.S. military installations and overseas locations, their mailing addresses are constantly changing. This challenge makes it critically important that DoD be able to redirect blank ballots effectively and efficiently. Sadly, this is precisely where DoD has failed these overseas troops.

Ballot delivery problems in the 2010 election were due in part to DoD lacking a "centralized mail redirection system" for overseas addresses, according to the MPSA report, and MPSA's top two recommendations to DoD both sought to address this problem. Specifically, MPSA recommended that DoD develop a centralized mail forwarding system similar to the Postal Automated Redirection System (PARS) used by the U.S. Postal Service (USPS).

If DoD had followed this recommendation, it would have reduced ballot transit time by several weeks for many overseas service members who are trying to vote. Under the antiquated mail redirection procedures currently used by DoD, the one-way transit time for blank ballots redirected to or from overseas typically ranges from 14 to 50 days, depending on the overseas location and operating conditions. The more efficient PARS system would cut the average transit time for redirected ballots to just three days, according to USPS.

DoD's failure to fix this longstanding problem means that the blank ballots of thousands of overseas service members, as well as some who have recently returned from overseas, could be currently trapped in an archaic and inefficient mail forwarding system. These ballots are unlikely to reach these service members until after Election Day has passed.

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The impacts could be especially widespread this year, in light of the large numbers of service members who have returned to the U.S. due to the President's pullout from Iraq and unwinding of the troop surge in Afghanistan. This includes almost 40,000 service members whose mail had been going to Iraq just one year ago, and nearly 30,000 whose mail had been going to Afghanistan.

We are perplexed as to why DoD did not do everything in its power to modernize the system for redirecting blank ballots in order to eliminate this roadblock for military service members, per the top 2010 recommendations from MPSA. As we know you agree, they deserve to have a voice in choosing their elected leaders. Our men and women in uniform should be able to participate in the very same democratic system of government that they defend, not be relegated to mere spectator status because their ballot never reached them.

Therefore, we ask you to ensure that DoD moves expeditiously to modernize its system for redirecting blank ballots, so that our service members do not encounter the same roadblocks to voting in the next election cycle. In addition, we request data on the specific number of service members who requested absentee ballots for the 2012 general election but have yet to receive them due to delays attributable to DoD's mail forwarding system.

We appreciate your attention to this important matter. Thank you for your service to our nation and your support of our men and women in uniform and their families.

Sincerely,

John Cornyn

Mark

John McCain

Rob Portman

Kelly A. Ayotte