

## The Soldier Vote

The Soldier Vote  
War, Politics, and the Ballot  
in America

*Donald S. Inbody*

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THE SOLDIER VOTE

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*For Jeannine*

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# Preface

This project actually began in 2000 in the immediate aftermath of the presidential election of that year, the *Gore v. Bush* Supreme Court case, and the discussion about absentee balloting and the military vote. The assumption, at the time, was that the military vote was overwhelmingly in favor of George W. Bush. Both Republican and Democrat operatives believed—or at least behaved as though they believed—that military voters were largely conservative and Republican.

After over two decades of active service in the navy at that time, I questioned those assumptions. I knew that racial and ethnic groups that tended to identify with the Democratic Party were overrepresented in the United States military. While recent research made it clear that the officer corps identified as Republican over Democrat by as much as 8 to 1, no such research had then been done with respect to enlisted personnel. In short, it appeared that findings about the officer corps were being assigned to enlisted personnel. Assuming that enlisted personnel behaved just like officers in their political preferences seemed to me to be unwarranted.

Officers make up only about 15 percent of all military personnel. While officers are largely white, college-educated males, a demographic that tends to identify as Republican, the same cannot be said of enlisted personnel. Because of those demographic differences, classical research in political behavior would predict that the enlisted population would behave differently from officers. The question, then, is whether that prediction is true in the case of the military population. Or, are military personnel so unique that the usual predictors of political behavior do not apply?

My experience with enlisted personnel began in 1979 when I first found myself in charge of some four dozen navy enlisted sailors and discovered that they represented a long and valued tradition of service to the United States. Often disregarded as undereducated, economically limited, and social misfits, the enlisted personnel were none of these. I found it not to be true then and certainly not true today. I also found that they saw the world differently than I did and had remarkably different political persuasions and opinions. Fast forwarding to 1996, I was Captain of

USS *Duluth*, an 18,000-ton amphibious ship in the Pacific Fleet, and responsible for the lives and safety of 450 sailors and some 600 embarked marines. Most of those sailors and marines were enlisted men, and my appreciation of and fascination with their dedication, skill, and intelligence was enhanced.

Later, when I was assigned to be the professor of Naval Science at the University of Texas, commanding the Naval ROTC Unit in Austin, I had the opportunity to pursue a PhD in Government. That gave me the opportunity to explore and begin to resolve the questions brought up in 2000 and to find out whether officers and enlisted were interchangeable as far as political behavior was concerned.

In researching, I discovered that much had already been written on the soldier vote. I found that several authors had noticed that improvement of absentee laws and the expansion of the voting franchise often correlated with war. However, I also discovered that there was no comprehensive history of how military personnel away from home and American citizens who lived overseas came to have access to the ballot. I also noticed that there was a tie between the large body of literature on American civil-military relations and providing voting rights to service personnel.

I found a great deal written about soldier voting in the Civil War and some about World War II. However, there were gaps in the history. I found little for the years prior to the Civil War and almost nothing for the period between the Civil War and World War I. I did, however, discover that the impetus for pushing for soldier voting rights was not just war, but also the often concurrent increased size of the army and the deployment of those troops away from their home counties.

While I certainly recognize that the title of this book, *The Soldier Vote*, seemingly excludes anyone not in the army, it points out the importance of the army in American life. Most Americans know about the other services, but generally have more of an affinity to the army. With the rise of the National Guard, beginning in the late nineteenth century, the local presence of the army was enhanced. Most of those who went on active military service during the wars of America were in the army. The soldier stands out as the catalyst and thus the namesake for this book.

Many have already written about the soldier vote. I have attempted to recognize them in the manuscript that follows, but three authors particularly stand out as important. Their books lay on my desk as I wrote, and were referenced often. First, Alexander Keyssar's excellent *The Right to Vote* provided much in the way of background and insight into the overall historical arc of suffrage in the United States. Before most, he recognized that war was the catalyst for much in the way of expansion of the franchise. His book is the best single source on elections in America.

Second, Ira Katznelson's *Fear Itself*, a more recent addition, provided a look into the soldier vote issues of World War II. His chapter six, "Ballots for Soldiers," points out the dominant position that southern politicians had in Congress during the first half of the twentieth century and why the Soldier Voting Act of 1942 was so limited in its initial impact.

Third, an obscure book, *Voting in the Field*, self-published in 1915 by Josiah Henry Benton Jr., rose to the top of the list as a principal source. Benton, a Civil War veteran who served as a Private in Company H, 12th Vermont Infantry Regiment, later became a lawyer, was the clerk for the New Hampshire House of Representatives, and was a prolific researcher and writer. His book, actually little more than a collection of research notes, served as the best single-source for locating obscure legislative records about military absentee voting during the Civil War. In many cases, his footnotes led me to the original documents, many of which are now available online through archives.org, thus saving days of searching and crawling library stacks across the country.

My hope is that this book will provide those interested in American voting an insight into one small, but important, aspect of the franchise. Absentee voting, essentially unheard of at the time of the founding of the country, increasingly is now the standard for voting. Oregon has only vote-by-mail and other states, such as Colorado, make voting by mail ballot extremely easy. All this bodes well for the future of absentee voting by service personnel and Americans living overseas. The increasing use of technology, including using the Internet for electronic delivery and return, in some cases, of ballots, will become ever more important in public policy and voting laws.

\* \* \*

Part of the process of completing a major piece of research such as this is learning that a project of this size is a collaborative process. Many have participated in that collaboration and, at the risk of leaving someone important off the list, I will acknowledge them.

Steve Wasby entered my life while both of us were briefly on the faculty in the Political Science Department at the United States Naval Academy. A first-rate scholar of the American judiciary, he nevertheless stooped to assist and encourage a curious naval officer in his scholarly pursuits. He has tirelessly read and commented copiously on much of my writing over the years taking me to levels I would never have imagined possible. Specifically, he guided the writing of my dissertation, on which much of this book is based. The time he spent encouraging and prodding me to do better, is greatly appreciated and well beyond the call of duty. Steve introduced me to Ginger Kimler, an amazing editor, who read every word of

this work and offered her insights and recommendations for improvement. That additional set of eyes cannot be overvalued.

Daron Shaw set me loose on a research paper on military voting that started this project. He introduced me to surveys, election and voting behavior, and even put his own hand to work in assisting the shaping of the survey instrument that ultimately yielded much of the data for this book. Daron, most likely unbeknownst to him, actually suggested the title to this book in one of our discussions.

Mel Hinich, sadly now no longer with us, introduced me to the detailed math behind time series analysis and spatial analysis and invited me, quite unexpectedly, into his world of statistics by permitting me to cowrite a statistical paper with him. His help in understanding quantitative analysis helped this non-math major to navigate that useful world. And, speaking of statistics, thanks to Larry Fulton, a colleague at Texas State University, who provided some able and much-needed tutoring on statistical analysis.

Zoltan Barany, civil-military scholar extraordinaire, was one of the first at the University of Texas to encourage me to continue on this academic path, and continually prodded me to keep thinking about civil-military relations. He introduced me to some of the best literature in the field, expanding my knowledge into the international arena.

While at an annual meeting of the Overseas Vote Foundation, I met Mark Ritchie, then secretary of state for the State of Minnesota. Quite by chance, he made reference to an interesting historical note about absentee voting during the American Revolution. He gave me a copy of the reference that subsequently led to further details about soldier voting in the early years of the Republic. That meeting led to continued contact and discovery of his very real and effective support for military voters.

And, speaking of the Overseas Vote Foundation, Chip Levanthal, Susan Dzieduszycka-Suinat, and Claire Smith invited me into that world and introduced me to an amazing group of people researching and writing about all aspects of absentee voting, especially for military personnel. They are an outstanding group dedicated to ensuring military personnel and citizens living overseas are able to vote. Their generosity and faith in me has introduced me to an amazing array of well-informed and interesting people who are genuinely interested in figuring out how best to get the ballot to our deployed military personnel.

I cannot go far in these acknowledgements without saying thanks to Peter Feaver of Duke University, one of the leaders in the field of civil-military relations. After an email briefly introducing myself to him and asking for help near the beginning of my doctoral studies, he sent me a wonderful civil military reading list that brought me quickly up to speed in the field. His patient responses to my queries were not only helpful but also

encouraging. Peter Trubowitz encouraged me to use that reading list to produce an annotated bibliography early in my graduate work that repeatedly has proven useful, some of which has found its way into this book.

Bat Sparrow called me one day while I was in my office in the Naval Science Department at the University of Texas. He had been assigned to chair a committee to decide if this old Navy Captain should be permitted to join the Government Department's graduate program. His questions helped me to decide why I really wanted to pursue a doctorate after an already full naval career. I was surprised one day when he asked me to co-write a paper on American civil-military relations, which we presented at the 2005 American Political Science Association annual meeting. He chaired my dissertation committee and his faith in my academic pursuits was inspiring, kept me moving ahead, and is in no small way responsible for any scholarly successes of mine. Watching him write his own book on Brent Scowcroft, *The Strategist*, showed me the patience and diligence necessary to produce a good work of scholarship that is both informative and readable.

Terri Givens offered her support for my endeavors and helped change me from an old salt into a member of the academy. Conversations with her also led to insights into minority group behavior, much of which informed this research.

Among the others who provided help, both great and small, on this project include Steve Ansolabehere, Rachel Hertz Cobb, Tanuja Kumar, Shanea Watkins, Jean Rice, Scott Seggerman, Lauren Jackson, Gregory Black, Lindsay Cohn, Jerald Bachman, Richard Kohn, Pat Shields, Larry Fulton, and Hyun Yun. Also helpful were the friendly suggestions and comments by faculty at the University of Texas to include John Higley, Brian Roberts, Harrison Wagner, David Leal, Russ Muirhead, Pat McDonald, Sean Theriault, and Paul Woodruff. For helping me through the seemingly endless morass of government documents, I am most grateful to Hithea Davis, librarian at Texas State University, who patiently located records seemingly lost to the ages.

Russ Carter provided his collection of photographs of War Ballots and other postal material related to military voting. His kind and generous permission to use those photos in this book is greatly appreciated.

For insights into the world of the local election official, I thank three County Election Administrators, Jacque Callanen (Bexar County, Texas), Joyce Cowan (Hays County, Texas), and Joe Mansky (Ramsey County, Minnesota) who were unselfish of their time. I spent hours talking with them and asking them for data and experiences. At the state level, Keith Ingram, the Texas State Director of Elections never refused a request for a meeting and provided me with his thoughts, experiences, and data.

I offer my deepest thanks to all those unnamed individuals, including several fellow graduate students at the University of Texas and my colleagues at Texas State University, who put up with my endless discussions on this topic and who offered advice and ideas on how to fine-tune the presentation.

And, how can I go far without acknowledging Jeannine, my wife, who spent as many years in the Navy as did I, was associated with those same enlisted personnel and their spouses, and voted while living overseas. For her continual encouragement throughout the entire process, and for her advice and counsel, I give her my heartfelt thanks.

However, despite the able assistance and flawless guidance of all, the work herein is mine and I take full responsibility for any errors in fact and form.