

# U.S. Takes Steps to Simplify Voting From Abroad

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 28 — For Americans abroad, who often feel underrepresented, overlooked and little appreciated in the United States, the approach of the 2008 elections has brought some grounds for hope that this time their votes have a better chance of counting.

Last month, the nonpartisan Overseas Vote Foundation, or O.V.F., unveiled a revamped voter-assistance Web site that has drawn wide praise ([www.overseasvotefoundation.org](http://www.overseasvotefoundation.org)).

Dorothy van Schooneveld, of American Citizens Abroad, said the new software made it “rapid, simple and almost foolproof to register” from abroad.

Members of a new Americans Abroad caucus in Congress, which has tripled in size since its formation last spring, have introduced two bills aimed at simplifying voter registration, expanding voter education, and ensuring that expatriates’ ballots are counted.

Expatriate groups have warmly welcomed both bills. And the Pentagon, after years of costly and uneven experimentation, plans to inaugurate next month an updated voter-assistance Web site that eventually will allow overseas voters from some states to download ballots, and not just registration and ballot-request applications.

“Far too many overseas Americans — including many of the brave men and women serving in our military — are being disenfranchised by a tangle of bureaucratic red tape,” said Representative Carolyn Maloney, Democrat of New York, in announcing her sponsorship for one of the bills.

American voters abroad have long faced intense frustrations. But the 2000 election debacle galvanized private groups and election officials to seek ways to attack underlying problems, which have been numerous.

“Mail will get lost, you’ll work with a local election official who doesn’t understand the law, you’ll find some places not sending out proper postage on ballots, just all sorts of problems,” said Michael McDonald, an elections specialist at George Mason University who advises O.V.F.

A federal study in September found that barely one-third of the nearly one million absentee ballots requested by Americans overseas in 2006 were actually cast or counted;

an estimated 4 million to 6 million Americans — civilians and in the military — live and work abroad.

Although the numbers in the study were deemed incomplete, they nonetheless portrayed an electorate discouraged by difficulties, delays and confusion.

The two new bills — the second was introduced by Representative Mike Honda of California — address some of the problems.

The first bill would, among other things, prohibit states from refusing balloting materials because they are generated by a computer program or not printed on a specific type of paper, and extend voting rights to Americans born overseas who have never established American residency.

The Honda bill would ban states from requiring the witnessing or notarization of ballot-return envelopes, long a problem in remote areas; to require that passports include information on absentee voting; and to create a \$5 million grant for nonpartisan organizations to assist overseas voters.

The bills may ultimately be melded, a Honda spokesman said.

Prospects for the legislation are unclear, but expatriate groups strongly back them. Three nonpartisan groups — American Citizens Abroad, the Association of Americans Resident Overseas, and the Federation of American Women's Clubs Overseas — announced their “unified, strong support.”

“These bills will enfranchise some would-be voters and ensure that good-faith ballots are not rejected,” said Lucy Laederich of the women's federation.

Christine Marques, international chair of Democrats Abroad, called the legislation “practical” and added, “We're really delighted.”

Cynthia Dillon, executive director of Republicans Abroad International, had no comment. Robert Carey Jr., a navy reservist with the National Defense Committee, a grass-roots, pro-military organization, said the bills “both address a very real problem: a poorly written original election law.”

Mr. Carey is no fan of previous electronic attempts by the Federal Voting Assistance Program, an arm of the Pentagon, to help troops through the election process, calling them costly, ineffectual and “mismanaged.”

His committee urges troops instead to use the O.V.F. program.

The Pentagon has spent several hundred thousand dollars since 2000 on what J. Scott Wiedmann, deputy director of the Federal Voting Assistance Program, called a “secure voting experiment.”

Fewer than 100 people actually used it in elections, however. But Mr. Wiedmann insisted that the early efforts helped lay groundwork for the launch next month of a new system. Like the O.V.F. site, it will offer an interactive approach to inform voters about home-state requirements and guide them through a simplified registration and ballot-requesting process.

With the new system, a dozen states will allow voters to scan a completed ballot-request form and e-mail it, rather than using mail, Mr. Wiedmann said. And beginning in March, some counties will be able to e-mail blank ballots.

In February, Ms. Marques said, Democrats Abroad plans to make extensive use of fax and Internet, as well as regular mail and in-person voting, in a first “global primary” to send 22 delegates to the Democratic National Convention next August in Denver.

Only people who register as members of Democrats Abroad before February — and who are not voting directly in state primaries — can take part. Results will be used to pick delegations for regional caucuses in Brussels and Vancouver, British Columbia, which in turn will select the Denver delegation. Republicans Abroad has no comparable program, Ms. Dillon said.

New technologies or not, Mr. Wiedmann urged voters not to tarry.

“It’s part of living overseas,” he said. “You can’t wait as long as you would at home.”