CHAPTER 11

Conclusion: So What and Who Cares?

It is the sense of Congress that each person who is an administrator of a Federal, State, or local election should be aware of the importance of the ability of each uniformed services voter to exercise the right to vote; and should perform that persons duties as an election administrator with the intent to ensure that each uniformed services voter receives the utmost consideration and cooperation when voting.

Public Law 107107—MOVE Act

Americans want their soldiers to vote. At least that is what the public says in recent surveys and what politicians say publically. But this has not always been the case. Throughout much of American history, soldiers and sailors, while important, were not considered part of the state electorate. Reminiscent of the warnings against the maintenance of a large standing army, military personnel were seen as dangerous to democracy and inimical to liberty. Most states took steps to ensure that the troops in any federal army were specifically barred from voting and from impacting local politics as a result. Soldiers, especially those soldiers in the federal army, were not considered state citizens and therefore not eligible to vote in state elections.

Wars shook that thinking, however. Most notably, the Civil War and World War II, but also, to some extent, the Spanish-American War and World War I. The post–Korean War decision to maintain a large standing army in peacetime also caused concern from an electoral as well as a liberty point of view. Never before had the United States had to contend with so many citizens in uniform while not engaged in a war. The concurrent expansion in the numbers of Americans living overseas in the post–World War II years brought new pressure on legislators to change election laws.
concerning voters who lived overseas to permit them to participate more easily in the political process.

Wars and the impact they have on society increased interest in ensuring that citizens who go away to fight are not denied the right to vote. However, until recently that right to vote was strongly contested, often along political party lines. Today, there is little evidence of either major political party objecting to the soldier vote. However, accusations of partisan interest remain. To be accused of disenfranchising military voters is a smear no politician wants to endure. The soldier vote can still bring out strong emotions.

Convinced that in recent years the military vote was strongly in the favor of Republican candidates, Republicans often look for opportunities to accuse Democrats of opposing military voters. In an attempt to gain favor in Ohio just before the 2012 general election, the Romney campaign accused the Obama administration of undermining the voting rights of military personnel, while the facts of the case, *Obama for America v. Husted*, do not bear out that claim. That the Romney campaign would use that argument says much about which party they thought military voters would support.¹ The complaints and accusations say more about how important it is to gain the Electoral College votes of Ohio in the election than anything else. The military vote became a partisan political issue that sparked debate and confusion.²

Some progress has been seen, however, even among the strongly partisan press. Recognition that the military vote may not be identifying as strongly Republican is beginning to take hold. Recent studies demonstrating that the military vote, particularly the enlisted vote, more or less matches that of the general American population are apparently being read and taken seriously.

For example, during a television discussion in August 2010 about the issue of requests by states on the forty-five-day waiver of the MOVE Act, one commentator said, “There’s a perception—and it’s not true—in American political history that somehow, voters are going to be Republican—military voters are going to be Republican. That goes back to the Civil War. Since then, there’s been no discernible pattern.”³ The rest of the conversation still seemed to imply that there were politicians who still believed that the military vote was strongly Republican, but at least that one commentator was reporting accurately.

Military voters have rarely had much impact in swaying elections. The total number of Americans participating in the military by serving on active duty has always been small. American liberal democratic tradition has maintained a long-standing distrust of the military. Fears of a large standing army predated the American Revolution and remain strong