

Report: One-third of overseas voters couldn't cast a ballot last fall

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WASHINGTON — Nearly one-third of overseas voters surveyed by a voting rights advocacy group could not cast a ballot in last November's election, but officials say that's actually an improvement from previous election cycles.

According to a new survey by the Overseas Vote Foundation, about 18 percent of voters living abroad who tried to cast an absentee ballot never received one, and nearly 13 percent did not receive the forms in time to successfully vote in the mid-term election.

But the foundation called that encouraging. In 2008, nearly half of all overseas voters surveyed said they did not vote in the presidential election, most because their ballots arrived just a few days before the deadline to submit them.

“We’re seeing more voters sending their ballots back successfully, so that’s definitely a better trend,” said Claire Smith, director of research for the group.

The report, which surveyed nearly 5,300 overseas voters, only includes a small percentage of military personnel stationed outside the United States. Official numbers won’t be available until spring on how successful absentee voting efforts were among troops last fall.

And nearly 70 percent of those surveyed by the group tried to vote in the 2010 elections, well above the 40 percent voter participation rate among stateside citizens.

But the foundation’s numbers point to significant improvements in the process for both civilian and military voters abroad, many of whom have a window of just a few days to participate in elections.

Smith noted that last year all 50 states had some electronic transmission options for voter registration or absentee ballot delivery, either through fax, e-mail or online forms. In 2008, only 20 states offered those options.

In addition, 40 states sent out their absentee ballots to overseas voters at least 45 days before the 2010 election, and the remaining 10 extended their deadlines for return of those ballots to ensure better participation.

Those changes came as a result of a mandate from Congress following the 2008 election, after many state election officials admitted that ballots were mailed too late for overseas voters to participate.