

Focus Group Guide

Military Family Members - OCONUS: In-person

Time available: 135 min.

Current time: 145 min.

I. Standard Introductions (10 min.)

- A. Thank you for attending, my name is [MODERATOR NAME], and I will be talking with you about how voting and elections work for people like you who are the spouses or children of military members who are stationed here overseas. However, I want to make it clear that rather than talk about candidates and political issues, we're going to focus on the voting PROCESS and how it works for people like you. We're not interested in your political views and are actually going to try to avoid talking about that tonight and really just focus on the process.
- B. Explanation of focus group
- C. Explain moderator's role
- D. Participation is voluntary; refusal to participate carries no penalty
- E. Rules of the focus group—one person leaves at a time, avoid side conversations, one person speaks at a time, equal air time, speak as loud as I am
- F. Overview of the room and any recording devices
- G. No personally-identifiable information will be used in reporting
- H. Request that respondents do not share the discussion with others after the session is over
- I. Participants' self-introductions

II. Perceptions of the Voting Process (48 min.)

- A. Today we are going to talk a bit about how voting and elections work for people like you who are the spouses or children of military members who are stationed here overseas.

Again, instead of focusing on candidates and political issues, we are going to talk about the process of voting and how the system works.

EASEL. What are the steps of the voting process for you and people like you who are stationed with your family here?

1. **HANDOUT.** Thinking about the election this past November, how easy or difficult was the process of voting? Give the process a rating on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 means it was very difficult, and 1 means it was very easy. You can use any number in between.

HANDCOUNT AND DISCUSS BRIEFLY.

- a. Hand count: Raise your hand if this was your first time voting absentee as a military family member.
 - b. Where did you initially go to get information about the voting process? Where did you start?
 - c. What prompted you to seek information about voting?
PROBE: Did you receive any e-mails? Hear or see any advertisements?
 - d. Did anyone talk to you about the voting process?
2. What about registration? How do you register to vote here?
 - a. Have you ever used a Federal Post Card Application to register?
[IF NO]: Have you heard of that?
 - b. Have you ever been unsure about what U.S. address you should use for registration?
PROBE: How do you find out?
HANDCOUNT. Has anyone here never lived in the U.S.?
[IF YES]: How do you determine what address to use for registration?
 - c. Once you registered to vote, did you receive any type of confirmation?
3. How do you usually get a ballot? **PROBE:** Online, by mail?
 - a. Did you have to request a ballot, or did it come automatically?
PROBE: When was the last time you submitted an application for a ballot?

- b. **[IF REQUESTED]:** How long did it take from the time you requested a ballot to the time you actually received it?
 - c. **[IF REQUESTED]:** Did you know what the deadline was for requesting the ballot? How did you find out?
 - d. **[IF NEVER RECEIVED BALLOT]:** Tell me about that. Did you ever find out why you didn't receive it?
 - PROBE:** Did you hear from your local election official about that? Did you contact anyone about it?
 - e. Do you remember if you provided your e-mail address as another way your local election official could contact you?
 - f. Is there anything that could make this process of requesting and receiving a ballot easier?
4. Have you ever used a Federal Post Card Application to request a ballot?
[IF NO]: Had you heard that you can request a ballot with it?
- a. Tell me about that form. What was your impression of it?
5. How did you receive or print the ballot?
- a. How easy or hard was it to fill out the ballot?
 - i. Was there anything confusing about it?
6. Have you ever voted using a Federal Write-in Absentee ballot (FWAB)?
[IF NO]: Have you heard of that?
- a. **[PASS OUT COPIES OF FWAB]**
Let's take some time to look at the FWAB. What jumps out at you on this form?
 - i. Which parts of this form seem easy?
 - ii. Which parts of this form seem difficult or confusing?
7. Did you know what the deadline was for sending the ballot? How did you find out?
- a. How did you actually send the ballot? **PROBE:** Mail? Fax? Email?

[IF MAIL]: From where did you mail it?

8. Thinking about the steps you took to complete the voting process, including registering, requesting a ballot, and completing a ballot, did you have access to a computer?
 - a. The web?
 - b. A printer?
 - c. A scanner?
 - d. A fax machine?
 - e. A smart phone or tablet?

PROBE: Were there any devices that you could not access for personal use?

9. How confident are you that your vote was counted?
[IF ANY DOUBTS]: What raises doubts for you?

10. Once you sent your ballot in, did you receive any type of confirmation that it was received?
[IF NO]: Is that something that would be helpful? In what way would it help?

[ASK ONLY IN OCONUS GROUPS]:

- a. Have you ever heard of a ballot tracking system available to military absentee voters?
- b. Let me read a description so we're all on the same page.

[READ DESCRIPTION]: When you bring your ballot to the post office, military personnel with APO/FPO addresses can now return absentee ballots via Priority Mail Express using a special label.

The unique Priority Mail Express label is only for absentee ballots from Military Post Offices overseas. It can be stuck to the upper right corner of any size ballot envelope. The voter keeps a portion of the label to track his or her ballot.

- i. Tell me about your reaction to this system.
- ii. Would this solve the problem of not knowing if your ballot was received?

iii. Does it seem like something that would be offered to people like you who are the family members of service members?

iv. Is there anything missing from this system that could make it better?

11. Thinking about the voting process from beginning to end, about how long did it take?

a. Did you feel overall like you had enough time to complete the voting process before the deadline was up?

12. For those of you who have voted absentee before, how was this election different from previous elections, if at all?

a. Tell me about any other problems you've encountered in the past.

PROBE: How did you solve that problem? Did you ask anyone for help?

13. Did you see or hear of anyone you know here encountering any difficulties in voting, either in this election or in others?

a. What about other family members of service members?

B. How does voting abroad compare to voting in the U.S., in terms of how difficult or how easy the process is?

1. How easy or hard is it for other people like you who are stationed with your families here?

a. Have you heard of anyone having problems voting?

b. Do you talk with people you know here about the voting process?

C. Is there anything about the voting processes or procedures that make you feel discouraged about voting?

1. Can you think of any barriers to voting from here? What might hold people back?

2. **EASEL:** If you could change one thing about the voting process, what would that be?

III. Voting Values (10 min.)

- A. **WRITE.** Where does voting fit in with everything else you do here? How high of a priority is it? **DISCUSS.**

- B. What is the most important reason to vote for you personally?
 - 1. Has voting become more or less important to you since you've been abroad?

- C. How important do you think voting is to military family members?
 - 1. How important is voting to your family?

- D. Are people like you stationed here more **ENCOURAGED** to vote or **DISCOURAGED** to vote?
 - 1. Who would encourage you to vote?
 - 2. Who would discourage you?
 - 3. Do you know anyone who has been discouraged from voting here?

IV. Voting Assistance/Resources (25 min.)

- A. When you have questions about the voting process, how do you go about getting information?
 - [IF ONLINE]:** What website would you go to?

 - 1. Whom would you ask?
 - PROBE:** Your family? Other spouses or children of service members?
Local Election Officials in your state? Voting Assistance Officers?
Installation Voting Assistance Officer?

HANDCOUNT: How many of you know what a VAO is?

- a. Anyone know WHO their VAO is?
- b. How did you or would you find that out?
- c. Have you heard of any family members using VAO services?

2. When you have a question ABOUT VOTING, are you generally able to get that question answered or not really?
 3. Whom do you trust to give you the information you need about how to vote?
 4. Are there any resources out there specifically for people like you—family members of military personnel?
- B. Thinking about Voting Assistance Officers again, what kinds of things do you think you could ask them about voting?
1. What have you heard about VAOs as far as how helpful or not helpful they are to family members?
 2. Is your VAO generally available to help?
 3. Have you ever asked your VAO anything about the voting process?
 4. Did the information they gave you answer your question?
 5. How comfortable did you feel during that process?
- C. Do you know what the Federal Voting Assistance Program is, also called FVAP?
HAND COUNT: How many have heard of it BEFORE you were recruited for this focus group?

[READ DESCRIPTION IF NECESSARY: The Federal Voting Assistance Program works to ensure Service members, their eligible family members and overseas citizens are aware of their right to vote and have the tools and resources to successfully do so — from anywhere in the world. Specifically, FVAP exists to:

- Assist uniformed services and overseas voters exercise their right to vote, so that they have an equal opportunity with the general population to have their vote counted.
- Assist the States in complying with relevant federal laws, and advise them on ways to best comply.
- Advocate on behalf of the uniformed services and overseas voters, identifying impediments to their ability to exercise their right to vote, and proposing methods to overcome those impediments.

- D. Have you ever visited the FVAP website to get information about the voting process?
1. How did you hear about the website?

- a. What was your general impression of the website?
 - b. Was there any information you needed that you couldn't find?
 - c. What was most helpful about the FVAP website?
 - d. What would you change about the website?
 - e. Have you ever visited the FVAP Facebook page?
- E. **[IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED]:** Are there any other websites or online resources you might use to get information?
PROBE: What about social media, like Facebook or Twitter?
1. How helpful are they?
 2. Are they easy to access?
 3. How did you hear about them?
 4. Would you use your home state's or county's websites about voting?
- F. What kind of information do you wish you had about the voting process?
PROBE: Which steps of the voting process do you wish you had more information on?

V. Voting Assistance/Resources: Examining Online and Print Resources (20 min.)

HANDOUT. Now I want you to look at some different resources about the voting process for overseas voters like you. For each one, give it a rating from 1 to 5 on how helpful it is for people like you. 5 means it's very helpful, and 1 means it's not helpful at all. Write down anything you think is particularly helpful. Write down anything you think is NOT particularly helpful. Write down anything that is confusing. Write down what you would change.

- A. FVAP.gov Frequently Asked Questions
1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**
 2. Which parts of this webpage stand out as helpful?
 3. Which parts of this webpage are unclear or confusing?

4. What information is missing from this webpage that you would want to know?
5. What would you change?
 - a. Does the webpage seem geared toward military family members at all or not really?

B. Spouse Poster

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**
2. Which parts of this poster stand out as helpful?
3. Which parts of this poster are unclear or confusing?
4. What information is missing from this poster that you would want to know?
5. What would you change?

C. FVAP email

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**
2. Which parts of this email stand out as helpful?
3. Which parts of this email are unclear or confusing?
4. What information is missing from this email that you would want to know?
5. What would you change?

D. Now I'd like to spend a little time on a new resource that might be developed to help people like you vote.

Some people have suggested that a smart phone app could be useful to help people through the voting process. What do you think of that?

1. What would be some important features to include?
2. Could you imagine anything that might go wrong?

- E. If you could design your own resource for the voting process, what else would you include that you haven't seen in these materials?

VI. Communication/Vote Motivators (25 min.)

HANDOUT. Now I want to read you some statements about military absentee voting. For each one, give it a rating from 1 to 5 on how motivated it makes you feel. 5 means it makes you feel very motivated to vote and 1 means it doesn't make you feel motivated at all. Underline anything you think is especially motivating or convincing, and cross out anything that confuses you or that you don't like.

- A. Voting is everyone's right, and it's one that our family members are fighting for as members of the Armed Forces. Even though we're stationed away from home, it's still important to remember that voting is a civic responsibility and is part of being American. Everyone should take the time to participate in our great democracy and send their vote home.

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**

- 2. What stood out to you?

PROBE: What do you think of the line, "send your vote home?"

- 3. What parts made you feel motivated?

- 4. What DIDN'T make you feel motivated?

- 5. What was confusing or unclear?

- 6. What would you change about this statement to make it more motivating?

- a. What if it said "civic duty" instead of "responsibility?"

- B. In America, voting is one day that we are all equal, because every vote counts equally, no matter who you are. Your vote matters, and the Department of Defense is working hard to make sure that every vote cast by family members of U.S. military personnel gets counted. It is important to do your civic duty and let your voice be heard, even if you are far away from home.

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**

2. What stood out to you?
 3. What parts made you feel motivated?
 4. What DIDN'T make you feel motivated?
 5. What was confusing or unclear?
 6. What would you change about this statement to make it more motivating?
- C. Voting makes me feel empowered, like I have some control over what happens to my family and my community, even if I'm away from home right now. My vote makes a difference, and I know that together Americans' voices count. If you don't vote, you can't complain, and being away from home is not an excuse.

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**

2. What stood out to you?
 3. What parts made you feel motivated?
 4. What DIDN'T make you feel motivated?
 5. What was confusing or unclear?
 6. What would you change about this statement to make it more motivating?
- D. Sometimes there are rumors that overseas or military absentee votes are not counted, or are only counted some of the time. But that simply isn't true. In fact, local election officials are **REQUIRED** to count every legal absentee ballot received, and some states even count the ballot if it's received after Election Day, but postmarked before. Your voice matters, and local election officials are working hard to ensure that your voice is heard.

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**

2. What stood out to you?
3. What parts made you feel motivated?
4. What DIDN'T make you feel motivated?
5. What was confusing or unclear?
6. What would you change about this statement to make it more motivating?

E. [SPOUSE/DEPENDENT-specific message, to be developed after ethnographies]

1. **HANDCOUNT. DISCUSS.**

2. What stood out to you?

3. What parts made you feel motivated?

4. What DIDN'T make you feel motivated?

5. What was confusing or unclear?

6. What would you change about this statement to make it more motivating?

F. **WRITE.** Now write a postcard to a friend who is also a military family member about why it is important to vote.

1. **DISCUSS.**

VII. Wrap-Up (7 min.)

A. **WRITE.** If you could only do one thing to make the voting process easier or work better for people like you, what would that be? **DISCUSS.**

B. Out of everything we talked about today, what stands out most?