

Focus Group Guide

Civilians: In-person

Time available: 135 min.

Current time: 135 min.

I. Standard Introductions (10 min.)

- A. Thank you for attending, my name is [MODERATOR NAME], and I will be talking with you about the absentee voting process. 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. Explanation of 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
 - a. When you introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about why you're here in (COUNTRY), and how long you've been living abroad.

II. Mood (5 min)

- A. Fill in the blank. I feel _____ about voting and elections in the U.S. today.
 - i. Discuss.

III. Perceptions of the Voting Process (30 min.)

- A. Today we are going to talk a bit about how voting and elections work for people like you who are American citizens that live and work abroad. But 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 living abroad?

1. Thinking about the election this past November, how easy or difficult was the process of voting?
 - a. Where did you initially go to get information about the voting process?
 - b. Did anyone talk to you about the voting process?
 - c. What parts of the process were more or less difficult?
 - d. What parts of the process did you complete online, if any?
 - e. When you were preparing to vote, did you have access to a computer?
 - i. The web?
 - ii. A printer?
 - iii. A scanner?
 - iv. A fax machine?
 - f. Did you request an absentee ballot for this election?
 - i. Do you get an absentee ballot automatically or do you have to apply for one for each election?
 - ii. How did you make the request? PROBE: Online, by mail?
 - iii. Did you hear back promptly, or did it take a while?
 - iv. How long did it take from the time you requested a ballot to the time you actually received it?
 - v. Is there anything that could make this process of requesting and receiving a ballot easier?
 - g. Did you know what the deadline was for requesting the ballot? How did you find out?

i. Did you remember your voting residence address?

h. Have you ever used a Federal Post Card Application (FPCA) to request a ballot?

i. And was that easy or hard to use?

ii. Are you aware of the FPCA classification system?

[IF NO]: Voters who use a FPCA have to classify themselves as either intending to return to the United States or NOT intending to return. Voters who do not intend to return may only vote in federal elections while voters who DO intend to return may vote in federal, state, and local elections.

iii. How do you feel about these rules?

i. How did you receive or print the ballot?

i. Did the ballot arrive on time?

[IF NO]: How did you handle that?

j. How easy or hard was it to fill out the ballot?

i. Was there anything confusing about it?

k. Did you know what the deadline was for sending the ballot? How did you find out?

i. And how did you actually send the ballot?

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

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

m. Have you ever used a Federal Write-in Absentee (FWAB) ballot?

[IF NO]: Have you heard of it?

i. How easy or hard was that?

ii. How did you get the FWAB?

n. How confident are you that your vote was counted?

[IF ANY DOUBTS]: What raises doubts for you?

- o. Did you ever encounter any difficulties in the voting process in this last election?
 - i. How about in a previous election?
 PROBE: How did you solve that problem? Did you ask anyone for help?
- 2. How does voting abroad compare to voting in the U.S., in terms of how difficult or how easy the process is?
- 3. Do you think it's easy or hard for other Americans you know who live abroad?
 - a. Is voting more or less difficult for some people?
 PROBE: Who?
 - b. Have you heard of anyone having problems voting?
 - c. Have you ever helped anyone figure out steps in the voting process?
 - d. Have your family members here voted?
 - i. Did they experience any difficulties?
 - ii. How many of you have children over the age of 18 here? **HANDCOUNT.**
 Are they registered to vote?
 - iii. How many of you have children over the age of 18 that have never lived in the U.S.? **HANDCOUNT.** Have they experienced any problems registering?
- 4. Is there anything about the elections and voting processes or procedures that make you feel discouraged about voting?
 PROBE: Can you think of any barriers to voting here?
 - a. Do you or people you know ever worry about tax implications at all or not really?
- 5. **EASEL:** If you could change one thing about the voting process, what would that be?

IV. Voting Values (10 min.)

A. **WRITE.** Thinking about all the challenges you have living and working overseas, where does voting fit in? How high a priority is it really? **DISCUSS.**

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

B. How important do you think voting is to other Americans you know here?

1. How important is voting to your family?

V. Voting Assistance/Resources (20 min.)

A. When you have questions about the voting process, how would you go about getting information?

[IF ONLINE]: What website would you go to?

1. Who would you ask?

PROBE:

-Work colleagues?

-Your employer?

-Non-governmental organizations?

-Local Election Officials in your state?

-Voting Assistance Officers?

-Embassy officials?

2. When you have a question, are you generally able to get that question answered or not really?

a. How accurate is that information?

3. Who do you trust to give you the information you need about voting?

a. Who is most likely to be knowledgeable about the voting process?

4. HANDCOUNT. How many of you know what a VAO is?

a. Anyone know WHO their VAO is?

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?

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?

C. Have you ever interacted with the U.S. Embassy to get information on voting?

1. Tell me about that experience.

2. Could you easily visit the embassy if you needed to get information?

3. Have you ever dropped off your ballot at the embassy?

PROBE: How easy or difficult was that?

D. Do you know what the Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) is?

HAND COUNT: How many have heard of it?

[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.

E. Have you ever used the FVAP Voting Assistance Guide? **[SHOW COPY]**

1. How did you hear about it?

2. How useful was it?

a. Did it include information that was useful to you as a civilian living abroad?

3. Would you recommend it to others?

4. Have you or would you share it with others in your family?

5. Was there anything confusing about the guide?

PROBE: Was anything unclear?

F. 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. Did it include information that was useful to you as a civilian living abroad?

G. [IF NOT ALREADY MENTIONED]: Are there any other websites or online resources you might use to get information?

PROBE: What about websites in your home state or local district? What about non-governmental websites?

- 1. How helpful are they?
- 2. Are they easy to access?
- 3. How did you hear about them?

H. 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?

I. In general, do you think there are a lot of resources out there for people like you who are living abroad or not too many resources?

VI. Voting Assistance/Resources: Examining Online and Print Resources (30 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?

6. Does this resource seem geared toward people like you who are civilians living abroad or not really?

B. Poster (civilian-specific)

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. State.gov Absentee Voting Information (webpage)

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?

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?

VII. Communication/Vote Motivators (20 min.)

HANDOUT. Now I want to read you some statements about overseas 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.

[CHOOSE 2 OF 3 MESSAGES TO TEST IN EACH GROUP]

A. Voting is every American's right, no matter where in the world you may be. Even though we're living 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?

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 U.S. government is working hard to make sure that every vote cast by overseas U.S. citizens 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. How believable is it that the U.S. government is working hard to make sure every vote counts?
 - a. What if it had said "election officials" rather than U.S. government?

7. 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 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. **WRITE.** Now write a postcard to a friend who is also an American citizen who lives abroad about why it is important to vote.
1. **DISCUSS.**

VIII. Wrap-Up (10 min.)

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

DISCUSS.

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