

Focus Group Guide

Non-voter civilian: In-person

[Internal note: Non-voters are 1) registered voters who did not vote in the 2012 election, can include attempted voters 2) people who tried but failed to register to vote]

Time available: 135 min.

Current time: 134 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 this discussion with others after the session is over
- I. Participants' self-introductions
 - a. When you introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about how long you've been here and what brought you abroad.

II. Attitudes Toward Voting (10 min.)

- A. Today we are going to talk a bit about how voting and elections work for people like you who are American citizens living or working overseas. Again, instead of focusing on candidates and political issues, we are going to talk about the process of registering, voting, and how the system works.

WRITE: Many people do not or are not able to vote. Tell me about what gets in the way of voting. Why do people like you sometimes not vote?

DISCUSS.

- B. What's different about voting from here and voting back home?
- C. If you were in the states, would you be more likely to vote or not really?
1. What is different about voting here than back in the states?
- D. Do you think your family or friends here vote? What have you heard from others about voting here?

III. Perceptions of the Voting Process (20 min.)

- A. Thinking more about the voting process, some people were able to vote this past November while others were not. Regardless of whether or not you actually tried to vote, I am interested in just getting your honest reaction to the steps of the voting process and things you know about absentee voting—either through your past experiences or from what you've heard from people you know here.

1. **WRITE:** Thinking about the voting process in general, how easy or difficult do you feel voting is here? On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very easy and 5 is very difficult, how easy is it to vote?

DISCUSS.

2. **EASEL:** What are the steps of the voting process for you and people like you in the military who are stationed here?

- a. What parts of the process do you feel are more or less difficult?

PROBE: What do you feel is the hardest part of voting?

- b. How did you know what these steps were?

- B. **WRITE:** If you wanted to get information about voting absentee, where would you start? What steps would you take?

DISCUSS.

1. **HANDCOUNT:** How many of you have heard of a Federal Post Card Application? [**READ DESCRIPTION IF NECESSARY:** This is a form that you can fill out to both register and request a ballot at the same time.]

- a. Have you ever used a FPCA to register or request a ballot?
- b. Tell me about that form. What was your impression of it?

2. Did you ever encounter any difficulties in the voting process in this last election?

- a. How about in a previous election?

3. What could go wrong in the voting process?

- a. Does anything about the voting process worry you?
- b. Is there anything about the elections and voting processes or procedures that make you feel discouraged about voting?
- c. Have you heard anything about people having problems voting here?
- d. What about the voting process for people like you who are abroad could hold people back?
- e. Is there anything about the voting process that is particularly confusing?

4. If you could change one thing about the voting process, what would that be?

IV. Perceptions of the Voter Registration Process (20 min.)

A. **EASEL.** Let's move on to the voter registration process. What are the steps of the registration process?

1. **WRITE:** Thinking about the election this past November, how easy or difficult was the process of registering to vote? On a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is very easy and 5 is very difficult, how easy or difficult was it to register to vote? **DISCUSS.**

- a. Are you clear about your state of residence or not really?

2. **EASEL:** What are the steps of the registration process?

- a. What parts of the process were more or less difficult?

PROBE: What part is the hardest?

- b. Can you register online?
 - c. Did you know what the deadline was for registering? How would you find out?
 - d. Have you ever questioned whether your registration was still valid or not?
3. Did you encounter any difficulties in the registration process this past November?
- a. How did you solve that problem?
 - b. Did you ask anyone for help?
 - c. To your knowledge, has your registration ever gotten rejected or become invalid?
 - [IF YES]:
 - i. How did you find out?
4. Have you ever been registered to vote in the past? How did you do that?
5. Are you aware that there is a new requirement that overseas voters may have to re-register each calendar year, depending on their state's requirements? This is different from the past when registration would stay active for two federal election cycles, or 4 years.
- PROBE: How did you find out?
- a. How much do you think this new requirement would affect the overall difficulty level of the voter registration process for you personally?
 - b. What about for other people you know here?
6. What would make the voter registration process easier?
- a. What additional information would make it easier to register?

V. Voting Values (12 min.)

- A. **WRITE.** Where does voting fit in with everything else you do here? How high of a priority is it? **DISCUSS.**
 - 1. **EASEL.** What is the most important reason to vote for you personally?
 - a. Has voting become more or less important to you since you've been here?
- B. How important do you think voting is to the people you work with and know here?

1. How important is voting to your family?
- C. Are people like you living here more ENCOURAGED to vote or DISCOURAGED to vote?
1. Who would encourage you?
 2. Who would discourage you?
 3. Do you know anyone who has been discouraged from voting here?

VI. 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: Family? Friends? People at work? Local Election Officials in your state? Voting Assistance Officers?

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?

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. Thinking back to this past election, had you heard from anyone about voting? Tell me about that.

- 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. 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?

VII. Voting Assistance/Resources: Examining Online and Print Resources (18 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?

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 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. In general, do these resources seem like they would be helpful to people like you who are American citizens living overseas, or not really helpful?

E. 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?

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

VIII. Communication/Vote Motivators (12 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?
 - 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 U.S. government is working hard to make sure that every vote cast by overseas 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 or military 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.**

IX. 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?