



BLUE STAR
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SURVEY



2020 Military Family Lifestyle Survey Comprehensive Report

Finding 4

In collaboration with



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The overwhelming majority of military family respondents are registered to vote. Their decisions about where they registered were influenced by rules/regulations and their desire to maintain connection to specific communities.

Military families are highly civically engaged. In fact, 89% of active-duty family respondents reported they were registered to vote, and of those registered, 95% reported an intent to vote in the next national and/or local elections (as of September–October 2020). This engagement is also evident in veterans,¹ who are more likely to vote than their civilian peers, and persists across demographics, such as race and citizenship; voter registration rates were similar among active-duty family respondents of color and

89% of active-duty family respondents reported that they are registered to vote

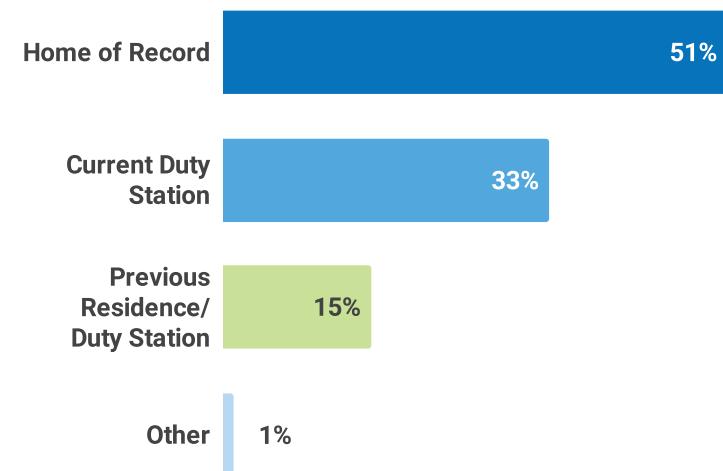
white, non-Hispanic active-duty family respondents. While only 7% of active-duty service member respondents and 4% of active-duty spouse respondents are U.S. citizens by naturalization, more than 80% of active-duty family member respondents who are naturalized U.S. citizens are registered to vote, and more than 90% of those registered

intended to vote in the next national election. On the other hand, fewer than one in 10 active-duty family member respondents (9%) reported not being registered to vote. Of those who were not registered at the time of the survey, the most common reasons were lack of interest in voting (30%), lack of external efficacy about electoral politics – e.g., do not think my vote will make a difference (14%) – ineligibility (13%), and lack of knowledge about the voter registration process – e.g., do not know where (12%) or how (12%) to complete voter registration.

Service responsibilities are worldwide and can take military families away from the United States, making absentee voting a necessity for civically-engaged military families. Prior to the November 2020 elections, roughly 12% of the active-duty force was stationed overseas.² While only 7% of active-duty family respondents were living overseas at the time of the survey, 94% of those individuals reported they were registered to vote.

Location of Voter Registration

Active-duty Family Respondents



Military families, protected under legislation such as the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) and the Military Spouse Residency Relief Act (MSRRA) are unique in their ability to select where they are registered to vote, often choosing between their or their service member's state of residency, home of record, a previous duty station, or current duty station. Active-duty family respondents' voter registration decisions were influenced by a number of factors. The most common are bureaucratic in nature, such as state residency rules and requirements (42%) and the ease or convenience of registering (23%). Respondents reported feeling their vote will matter more in the state where they are registered (24%), they want to stay connected to a community at home (22%), or they would like to have a voice in their current community (20%). Having a voice in the community is an important component of having a sense of belonging to that community, which, in turn, is associated with many other health and mental health benefits.³ Furthermore, there is evidence of a relationship between voter registration decisions and respondents' belonging to their local communities: active-duty family respondents who were registered to vote at their current duty station also reported significantly higher levels of belonging to the local community than those who were not registered locally.

While the current level of voter registration amongst military families is high, efforts to provide clear and easy access to registration materials and timely voting information must be maintained to ensure there are no voting barriers for any service members or their eligible family members.

RECOMMENDATIONS



CONGRESS

- Support policies that allow for the continued use and tracking of absentee ballots for service members and military spouses voting locally and absentee.



MILITARY

- Empower active-duty families to make informed decisions about their voter registration by providing clear and consistent information about voter registration requirements.*

*More information in Recommendations Chapter of Comprehensive Report

LIMITATIONS

While there is a very high degree of voter registration among active-duty family respondents, it is possible that social desirability bias may have influenced respondents to report higher voter registration and intent to vote than actually voted.⁴ Military family members may be registered to vote in their home of record, their state of residence, or their current or previous duty station.

Additionally, about 3% of active-duty spouse respondents were non-citizens at the time of the survey. Voter registration is only one indicator of civic engagement and does not capture the full extent of civic engagement among active-duty family respondents in their communities. Mean belonging score, measured by the Blue Star Families Belonging Scale, for those active-duty family member respondents registered to vote at their current duty station was 3.05, in comparison to a mean score of 2.84 for active-duty family respondents registered to vote in another location.



STATES

- Simplify the voter registration process for active-duty families.
- Provide clear guidance and answers to frequently asked questions for active-duty families on state and local board of elections websites.
- Educate civilian personnel and volunteers supporting local voter registration about requirements and procedures unique to active-duty families.

ENDNOTES

1. Teigen, J.M. (2006). Enduring effects of the uniform: Previous military experience and voting turnout. *Political Research Quarterly*, 59(4), 601-607. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4148062>
2. Defense Manpower Data Center. (2020). *Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country*. https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp
3. Michalski, C. A., Diemert, L. M., Helliwell, J. F., Goel, V., & Rosella, L. C. (2020). Relationship between sense of community belonging and self-rated health across life stages. *SSM – Population Health*, 12(6). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2020.100676>
4. Klar, S., Weber, C. R., & Krupnikov, Y. (2016). Social Desirability Bias in the 2016 Presidential Election. *The Forum*, 14(4), 433-443. <https://doi.org/10.1515/for-2016-0037>