

House State and Local Government Committee
Remarks Regarding House Bill 680
Zach Roberts – Veteran & Current National Guard Member
02 June 2020

Good afternoon Chairman Wiggam, Ranking Member Kelly, and members of the House State and Local Government Committee. My name is Zach Roberts. I am a Post-9/11 Veteran, and have experienced being deployed in service to our nation during an election. I am currently supporting our state in its efforts to aid community members in need who have been harmed by Ohio's current public health crisis. I would like to thank you for allowing me to share with you why I think HB 680 will harm Ohioans who are stationed or deployed overseas.

I deployed in 2009 from Ohio with my Columbus-based Air National Guard unit to Southwest Asia to serve my country. Throughout my almost 5-month deployment, my team and I participated in the region's Fallen Warrior program, in which we helped provide a dignified return to the 100+ members of the United States Military and Coalition Partners who died fighting in the Global War on Terror in Afghanistan and Iraq. My duties with the Fallen Warrior program, in addition to other squadron responsibilities, meant many days in which I worked over 14-hour shifts, often weeks on end before I was able to take a day off. This work was exhausting and humbling, but I felt pride in being able to play a small part in reuniting fallen servicemembers with their families.

In the rare moments of downtime I had on my deployment, I often sought opportunities to contact my friends and family back home. Being half a world away, I wasn't always lucky enough to get someone on the phone. This complicated my ability to pay bills, re-enroll in college, and also to vote in my city's special election.

What should have been a simple process took almost two months for me to be able to request, receive, and submit my absentee ballot. My home unit did not properly brief me on how to vote while deployed. The installation commander at my base had not bothered to maintain the voting assistance officer role for our base, because he wasn't aware that there were elections outside of presidential election years. Given my mission, I was assigned to an established base that had served as the regional logistics hub for mail for many smaller installations in the region. This was the only reason why I able to acquire stamps to mail in my absentee ballot request form and subsequent absentee ballot. In that way, I was in a unique position in my ability to participate in our democracy. But no voter – no matter where they're stationed – should be kept from an accessible path to exercise their right to vote.

It's clear from my experience that absentee voting is already incredibly difficult for active duty service members. We should be working to improve the process, not working to make it more complicated.

When someone joins the service, they swear an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. The commitment to this idea, to this oath, is what inspires men and women to join the United States Armed Forces. These beliefs are what drove me to serve on a Fallen Warrior team in Southwest Asia – and what motivated the men and women who died in service to our country that my team and I cared for as we helped bring them home.

I believe that legislation like HB 680 runs counter to what I swore to defend and uphold. We should be making it safer and easier for Ohioans – especially deployed Ohioans - to vote, not making it more difficult. If HB 680 were to pass, it would cut opportunities for early voting for Ohio-based military, overseas, and in-person voters. It would prohibit the Ohio Secretary of State from prepaying postage on any election mail (including both absentee ballot request applications and ballots themselves). The bill would also prohibit the Ohio Secretary of State from sending out unsolicited absentee ballot requests to voters – something the state has done in general elections since 2012 and which this same legislature already allocated funding and authority to do in just last year’s main operating budget.

Rather than working to make voting more difficult, particularly for military and overseas voters, I am asking that the members of this committee work actively to strengthen our existing absentee voting process, by making it easier for all Ohioans to vote:

- We should expand on the state’s online voter registration system and provide a way for voters to request absentee ballots online. Such an option would allow for deployed Ohioans to quickly acquire their absentee ballot and would conserve state funding resources.
- The legislature should maintain its funding allocation to allow the Secretary of State to mail all Ohio voters an absentee ballot request. This would be particularly helpful for Ohio’s military and overseas voters and would remove a potential barrier to participating in our democracy.
- Additionally, prepaying postage for absentee ballot request forms and absentee ballots will not only ensure equitable access to democracy, it will allow service members to focus on doing their job, instead of scrambling to find stamps that may not be readily available and delaying their ability to cast a vote as a consequence. No voter, particularly those who are deployed Ohioans, should be forced to pay to cast their ballots in an election. HB 680 would force such voters to do just that.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit my testimony. I hope that this committee will reconsider the unfair barriers that deployed Ohioans have to overcome to vote, that it will vote no on HB 680 in its current form, and that instead the committee works to ensure that all Ohio’s voters have an equitably accessible path to the ballot box – no matter where they are stationed.

The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government.