

**Statement of Senator John Cornyn (Texas)**  
**Before the**  
**Senate Committee on Rules and Administration**  
**Hearing on**  
**SENTRI Act (S.1728): Improving Voter Registration and**  
**Voting Opportunities for Military and Overseas Voters**  
**January 29, 2014**

I want to thank Chairman Schumer and Ranking Member Roberts for holding this important hearing this morning. Both Senator Schumer and Senator Roberts, the most senior Marine in the Congress, are tireless supporters of our men and women in uniform and their families.

The 2012 election made clear that there are still too many barriers to military service members and their families voting and having their votes counted, and that we must do more to protect their voting rights. In the weeks prior to the November 2012 election, I heard from numerous military service members from Texas and their families, both overseas and stateside, because they were having trouble voting. They reached out for help because Election Day 2012 was rapidly approaching, and they still had not received their absentee ballots. I heard from the grandmother of one Texas Marine who was serving in Afghanistan and the father of another, because both deployed Marines were still missing their ballots. I heard from the mother of an Airman from Texas who was in the middle of moving from one Air Force base to another and did not know where his ballot was going to be sent and whether it would reach him in time. These examples are typical of the hurdles our military voters face every election cycle.

These Americans make tremendous sacrifices in the defense of our nation, but those sacrifices should not include giving up their right to participate in our democratic process. Without

question, it remains much more difficult today for military service members and their families to exercise their right to vote than it is for their civilian counterparts. Most problems experienced by military voters stem from their being gone from their home voting jurisdictions on Election Day, which is a direct result of their federal military service. While it may never be as easy to vote for service members who are away from home as it is for civilians who can go to their local polling place, we owe military voters our best efforts to remove as many obstacles as possible. To that end, this past November, Senator Schumer and I introduced the Safeguarding Elections for our Nation's Troops through Reforms and Improvements Act (the SENTRI Act). I want to thank Senator Schumer and his staff for working with me on this important bipartisan reform bill.

Congress has already removed some major hurdles that hampered military voters in the past, most recently in 2009 by enacting a number of important reforms through the Military and Overseas Voter Empowerment Act (the MOVE Act), championed by Senators Schumer and Chambliss. I was proud to support the MOVE Act and to author two parts of it. The 2012 election was the first presidential election since the MOVE Act, and post-election analysis by the Election Assistance Commission (EAC) shows that this law improved various aspects of the process, including reducing the number of marked ballots that were rejected by election officials. However, the EAC data also reveal that large numbers of military and overseas voters continue to experience problems. For example, of all the blank absentee ballots that were sent out to military and overseas voters in 2012, more than 30 percent never made it back to local election officials to be counted. This suggests that many of those ballots never reached the intended voters, likely due to outdated voter registrations or ballot delivery problems. So, the MOVE Act made a difference, but clearly there is still room for improvement.

The area perhaps most demanding of our attention is military voter assistance. The significant drop in absentee ballot requests in 2012 points to the need for the Department of

Defense (DoD) to enhance its military voter assistance programs to put them more on par with “motor voter”-style assistance programs that benefit civilians stateside. Blank absentee ballots have a significantly better chance of reaching registered military voters at the correct mailing address if these service members are able to keep their voter registrations current, which can be challenging because of the transient nature of military service. In the MOVE Act, we attempted to address this problem by creating a voter assistance office on every military installation, but the program was never fully implemented by DoD. So, the SENTRI Act would require DoD to offer military voters an affirmative, annual, online opportunity to fill out a voter registration and absentee ballot request form. Helping military voters to keep their voter registrations current would also aid local governments in reducing waste and inefficiency by preventing blank ballots from being sent to outdated addresses.

The SENTRI Act includes several provisions to strengthen the enforcement of laws that protect military voting rights. It also relieves DoD of an unfulfilled 2002 mandate to put in place an Internet voting system. Lastly, the SENTRI Act extends to voting-age military children the guarantee of state residency for voting purposes, which Congress provided to military spouses in 2010, to allow these children to have the same state of residency as the military service member, so long as they qualify as dependents.

The SENTRI Act is aimed at fixing the system's most glaring deficiencies, which continue to inhibit our service members' ability to vote, and I hope the Committee will consider it favorably. However, there is no one-size-fits-all solution for the various problems faced by military voters, and I am hopeful that members of this Committee will offer additional ideas for preventing further disenfranchisement of our military voters. I look forward to working with the Committee to achieve that objective. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.