

# **American Party Politics: Organizational Asymmetry and Raising Stakes in the Competition for Votes Cast Abroad**

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## **Diaspora<sup>1</sup> Voting: Overview**

Enfranchisement of overseas voters



Western democracies by the 1970s, and it has really picked up since the 1990s, expanding to both democratic and non-democratic states across the globe, to a point where today more countries allow their diasporas to vote in national elections than not.

Rationales for enfranchisement vary across countries, from wanting to keep diasporas close, as allies in foreign policy, motivated to remit or invest

Gamlen, 2006; De Haas

2005; Wucker 2004; Landolt & Goldring, 2011) National parliaments have often adopted diaspora enfranchisement decisions with broad support from political parties. Opposition arose sometimes from nationalist or anti-globalization parties, that questioned the loyalty and citizenship rights of expatriates, or from parties that claimed that they were not popular with voters abroad and thus deemed their inability to vote as an electoral malady (Merdy, 1998; Bunce and Wolchik, 2006; Rhodes and Harutyunyan, 2010). Even so, the number of countries who have enfranchised their diasporas has increased tremendously: from a couple of dozen in the 1970s, to more than a hundred today (Turcu and Uchaf 2014).



The American case is quite unique also when it comes to voting procedures as well, in that American voters participate in national elections quite differently than any other diaspora or expat voters. While most diasporas cast their votes on election day, at embassies and consulates, diaspora churches and social clubs in their host countries, Americans must first register, and then mail their ballots into their most recent state of residence in the United States (Spates, 2006). This procedure, along with complex requirements for registration quite unique to the US, makes a cumbersome process, where the voter needs to be aware and meet several deadlines, mail in ballots sometimes weeks before the actual election date, and risk having their ballot lost in the mail (Huefner, 2013; Kalisa, 2019). Also, absentee voters undergo a verification and certification procedure that is quite unique to the US, especially since it is open to (and often subject



The incentive for parties undermining the diaspora vote is greatly increased in cases where this vote may hold major sway in the outcome of national elections. This can happen when a large section of the electorate lives abroad (as in the case with the Armenian diaspora), or when the electorate abroad is extremely ideologically homogenous, supportive of one party, and elections at home are extremely close. As mentioned above, instances of the external vote tipping elections in favor of a party or candidate that had not won at the national level, have occurred numerous times. In the past 15 years, diasporas have cast decisive ballots, overturning national election

Moldova, among others. This happened for presidential, and legislative elections, as well as referenda on constitutional change (Baiboc 2007, Gamlen 2015, Monforte and Morales 2018).

Despite its unique diaspora composition and voting procedures, the United States has come close to the diaspora playing a decisive role in the outcome of national elections, on several occasions.

Four of the most notable occurred in the past two decades, starting with the 2000 presidential election, which was decided by about 500 votes cast in Florida, a state where numerous votes arriving from overseas had been the subject of lengthy court battles (Imai and King, 2004).

The importance of the same diaspora vote came into national focus again in the 2004 elections (Teigen, 2007), in 2016 (Chase 2016, Jones and Andelic, 2016), and, more notably, in 2020, when votes cast abroad by Georgia expats, especially military voters, were suddenly perceived as potentially decisive in the race. Major news outlets emphasized the surprising outcome of said vote, with uniformed voters supporting the Democratic candidate, which was a break with their past electoral preferences (Newsweek 2020). More so, votes abroad were deemed likely to have a major impact on the presidential election and on the 2021 (WSJ 2020).





abroad, which almost doubled from 2008 to 2020 (Sexton 2016; Democrats Abroad 2020). When it came to actual representation through delegates at the national convention, those arriving from abroad were allotted 13 delegates, only one less than Wyoming and North Dakota. Both in 2016 and 2020, these delegates supported Bernie Sanders.

At the same time, the Democrats have been more proactive and more successful when it came to fundraising abroad. Both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama held numerous fundraisers abroad, most notably in the United Kingdom, contrasted with only a few on behalf of Romney and none for Trump (Swan, 2016). When it comes to overall fundraising, for presidential and other candidates, Democrats outraised Republicans abroad almost 2:1 in 2016, while Democrats Abroad outraised Republicans Overseas by more than 4:1 during the same period (Open Secrets 2019a; Open Secrets 2019b).

Republicans Overseas have quite a different status than Democrats Abroad. For one, they reorganized in 2013 from Republicans Abroad. They had operated as a nonprofit association (legally designated as a social welfare group) that received funding from the RNC. This in stark contrast from DA, which is registered as a party organization and is not funded by the DNC (Kalu and Scarrow, 2020). Donations to RO are not subject to the same limits as donations to political parties or organizations, but this in fact limits what RO can do. In fact, RO is depicted as an organization in pursuit of single-issue objectives or policies, such as lobbying in order to obtain tax exempt status for US citizens living abroad. Since its creation in 2013, RO has decreased ties with the RNC, and, unlike RA before it, no longer receives funding from the RNC, but relies on donations from Americans living abroad. Structurally, RO is not nearly as well established and organized abroad as the DA, nor does it have nearly as many members (Anderson, 2017; Brennan 2019). At the same time, the organization is broadly



For one, as noted above, Democrats are a lot more active and engaged in mobilizing voters abroad, facilitating their registration and voting procedures, fundraising and having them participate actively in primaries. Republicans overseas do not share into these electoral goals but focus on single issue advocacy and lawsuits as their most important goals. The behaviors very much mirror the idea of Democrats operating as an organization that seeks to bring together diverse groups and organize them under the party umbrella (Masket, Heaney, and Strolovitch 2014)

These same defining traits of the two parties, that make up the asymmetry discussed above, explain their different approach to voters abroad. As a purist ideological party, the GOP does not need to work hard to build coalitions and sell new ideas or policies to voters abroad, just like they do not need to do it at home. At the same time, beyond ideological simplicity, they also enjoy a much simpler process when it comes to getting their voters abroad to cast the vote. As discussed above, a large number of American voters abroad are military personnel, a longtime stronghold of the Republican party. These voters have much better access to voting infrastructure (registration, casting ballots) than regular US civilians living abroad. This is simply because military voters receive assistance from the Department of Defense when it comes to organizing to vote (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020). Thus, the GOP does not need to mobilize its base abroad. On the contrary, the Democrats, whose votes come mostly from military emigrants (students, academics, NGO workers), need to spend a lot more effort and money in organizing and mobilizing the vote abroad (Dark 2003).

Therefore, the GOP has a straight road ahead when it comes to the overseas vote: a dedicated electorate, mobilized by ideological conformity, and (when it comes to military voters, the bulk

American diaspora voters across multiple countries and is much more far reaching and expansive in seeking to include various populations and bring them out to vote, than Republicans, who have very pared down operations abroad significantly in recent years (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2015).

Party asymmetry can also be observed when it comes to examining party behavior after ballots from overseas are cast. In fact, differences are quite stark when it comes to dealing with verified, validated/ certified, and counted. This is because Republican investment with diaspora votes increases exponentially post-election, when votes are counted, and decertification of overseas or absentee ballots become the focus of the Republican Party in certain areas with close/ contested elections. In states of closely contested elections, Republicans have been found to be much more involved in monitoring and contesting votes coming from abroad than Democrats. Be it through county officials who certify or do not certify such votes, or through party officials who lobby the interest of the party in voter certification, or simply through

votes that are added or discarded (Teigen 2007; Imai and King, 2004). This type of behavior amounts to what in this paper I have

feared they lost the diaspora vote, undertake post-vote maneuvers to undermine said choices, discard or undercount their votes. Diaspora voting literature has discussed several such instances occurring across the globe in elections recent and old. Large, influential parties, tend to undermine diaspora votes quite often and without much afterthought or consequences, if they find such votes threaten their electoral interests (Baubock, 2007; Burgess 2010; Burean 2018; Turcu 2018).

In the case of the US, Republicans have an easier time than Democrats when it comes to suing post-election when they want to discredit absentee voting, because they are not traditionally

perceived as the anti-military party, so suing does not draw attention to them. Democrats are sensitive about being called anti-military and they are known for having withdrawn their lawsuits focused on decertifying military ballots in Florida in the 2000 election (Klekowski von Koppenfels 2020; Teigen 2007).

Actions taken by party lawyers to discredit or disqualify ballots coming from abroad have been used disproportionately by Republican lawyers in most presidential elections, starting with the 2000 election, as documented by Imai and King (2002). More recently, Republican cherry picking of ballots went in so far as to fight the disqualification of votes arriving from abroad





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