

New generation of veterans don't favor one political party

By David Wood, *Huffington Post*

WASHINGTON – Veterans and military families are no longer the dependable core of support for Republicans that they were for generations.

Seared by a decade of war and service in a military force that is more ethnically and racially diverse – and includes openly gay troops – more than two million Americans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan are powering a shift in electoral politics.

They are relatively small in numbers: less than 1 percent of qualified young Americans opt for military service. But they tend to be vocal and active, and more picky about throwing their support to one party.

As a result, the campaigns of President Obama and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney are fighting hard to win the votes of more than 30 million American veterans and their families. And their votes are up for grabs.

“We are not a homogeneous group,” said Alex Cornell, who fought as a Marine sergeant in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2006.

The experience of war makes veterans more skeptical, less willing to trust politicians. “We see through candidates and public officials who just make statements,” Cornell told the *Huffington Post*. “People are smart and realize that actions matter. How we look at specific issues – veterans care, GI bill, energy security – that trumps party affiliation.

“That’s why you see this shift, from the more homogenous,

'Republicans are better.' Now it's more mixed."

His views are backed up by polling, which has found a surprising diversity both inside the active-duty military and among veterans and families.

In an in-depth study of the American military, Lt. Col. Jason Dempsey, a West Point graduate with a doctorate in political science, found a stark difference between the small officer core – about 6 percent of the force – and the vast majority of active-duty troops who are enlisted.

"While army officers are likely to be more conservative, rank-and-file soldiers hold political views that mirror those of the American public as a whole," he writes. "Army personnel are less partisan and politically engaged than most civilians."

Another study, this one by Reuters/Ipsos, finds a wide variety of opinion among veterans and military families: More than half supported ending the military's policy of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" that outlawed openly serving gays; less than one-third said the war in Iraq ended successfully; a plurality (42 percent) said the U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan should not continue. Veterans and military families rejected the idea of "leading from behind" by 44 to 32 percent, in the poll.

While issues of war and terrorism tend to be hot-button issues for many voters, including those in the military, Dempsey found in his study of active-duty troops that, "on most social issues and questions of how the government should spend money, the attitudes of service members largely tracked those of the civilian population," he wrote in a blog post for the *Huffington Post*.

And with neither Obama nor Romney having had combat experience – or even peacetime service in the military – the narrative of an experienced commander-in-chief has become less potent.

Obama gets high marks for having managed two wars and “gotten” Osama bin Laden. But many combat veterans say time in uniform doesn’t really matter.

“Some presidents who were excellent as generals weren’t very good as presidents – Grant, for instance,” said Anne Rawley, a retired Navy captain with 26 years on active duty. “We’ve had excellent wartime presidents with no military background – Lincoln and Roosevelt.”

She said the commander-in-chief’s military experience “is not something I thought about” when she was serving as a combat trauma nurse at a hospital in Danang, Vietnam, where the “typical patient was a triple amputee with one eye gone.”

But veterans do have passion about issues specific to them: access to health care, education, housing and other benefits. Seeking to capitalize on veterans’ chronic impatience with the giant Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), the Romney campaign has been quick to criticize the Obama administration for not fixing its long-term problems.

“President Obama has failed to lead on the issues important to us veterans,” said Curt Cashour, who served for 15 months as an Army staff sergeant in Iraq, and is a Romney campaign organizer in Virginia. “President Obama has thrown a lot of money at the VA, but the problems have only gotten worse.” Romney, he added, “really wants to get into the VA and cut all the red tape.”

A senior Romney campaign adviser on veterans issues, who was allowed to speak to the *Huffington Post* only if promised anonymity, said Romney “can’t wait to get his hands on the VA to institute positive reforms.” He said the VA is “over-regulated,” and suggested that if veterans had trouble getting health care from the VA, they should be granted access to Tricare, the Defense Department’s health insurance plan.

“That’s nonsense,” said Ed Meagher, a forward air controller

with ground troops during the Vietnam War and a retired career VA official. "It's another way of saying, 'Put these guys out on the economy.'"

"It infuriates me," Meagher told *HuffPost*, "that some folks don't seem to realize we have a duty, we made a commitment" to veterans. "We have just run two wars on a credit card and the tail of this, the veterans who need and deserve help, may stretch out 50 to 60 years – and now they want to save money?"

Perhaps typical of the new generation of war veterans is Michael Cogar. A military brat – his father served in the Air Force – Cogar enlisted right out of high school, deployed twice in Iraq as an Army combat engineer hunting IEDs, and was blown up eight times. "That was one of the lowest numbers in our unit," he said. He was eventually diagnosed with Traumatic Brain Injury and released from the Army.

At loose ends, he picked the East Coast as a place to live and enrolled in Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Va., because it had the engineering courses he wanted to take. He didn't know anyone and had no family or friends in the region.

Eventually, he joined the university's Young Republicans club. Out of ideological conviction? Not so much, he said. "It seemed like a good way to meet new friends."