

they need to keep our Nation safe from threats both at home and abroad, and this bill, the national defense authorization bill, fulfills part of our commitment to do just that.

There are more than 200,000 military men and women stationed in Texas at places like Fort Hood, Fort Bliss, Lackland Air Force Base, Naval Air Station Corpus Christi, and Ellington Field. We in Congress have a duty to provide these men and women with the training, the tools, and the resources they need to achieve the most difficult missions they face today and embark on those that will inevitably arise tomorrow.

I have no doubt that these talented servicemembers could have chosen any career—certainly one that involved fewer sacrifices and more time spent at home with their families—but, instead, they have chosen to serve their country. That decision should never stand in the way of their ability to exercise one of the most fundamental rights we have as American citizens, and that is the right to vote.

In 2016, only 46 percent of Active-Duty military voted by absentee ballot—46 percent. What concerns me is the fact that one-third of those who did not vote said that the absentee voting process was too complicated. We have to change that, so I have introduced a bipartisan bill called the Military Voter Protection Act that simplifies the absentee voter registration process for servicemembers stationed abroad. It would ensure that within 30 days of arriving in theater during a deployment, servicemembers are provided with a briefing on absentee voting registration and an opportunity to fill out the registration form or application.

Currently, 28 States allow the Federal write-in absentee ballot to serve as both the registration form and the actual ballot itself. My bill encourages the remaining States to follow suit, reducing the amount of paperwork military members have to fill out in order to exercise their right to vote.

This is an important step to simplify that process for our men and women in uniform and ensure that arduous and cumbersome paperwork does not deter them or dissuade them from casting their ballot. I have been working with the chairman and the ranking member on the Armed Services Committee to ensure that this provision will be included in the Defense authorization bill for fiscal year 2020 to make it easier for our servicemembers to make sure their voices are heard at the ballot box.

As we prepare to consider the Defense authorization bill here in the Senate, I want to thank the men and women who serve our country and assure them that we will continue to do everything we can to support them and ensure they are empowered and mission-ready and, yes, that they can also cast their ballot.

TEXAS STORMS

Madam President, on another matter, like many parts of the country,

Texas has been impacted by severe weather. Last weekend, parts of my State were impacted by severe storms, bringing hail, rain, and winds up to 70 miles per hour. The quick-moving storms hurled debris and caused extensive and widespread damage. One of the most devastating scenes was an apartment building that was sliced by a construction crane and took a life.

In the wake of the storm, hundreds of thousands of North Texans lost their power, and many of them are still waiting for the lights to come back on. And if you have been in Texas during June, you know it is not just your lights you want; you want your air-conditioning to run as well. There is never a good time or circumstance to be without power, but in Texas, June is far from ideal.

As many Texans keep working to get back to some sense of normalcy, I want to express my gratitude to the first responders who have been working tirelessly to support our communities. I have immense respect and gratitude for those who take on these difficult and sometimes thankless jobs. We need to tell them every chance we get that we appreciate the work they do to protect our communities every day and especially during times of natural disasters.

Somehow, these challenging times have a way of bringing communities closer together and reminding us that through the hard times, we still have a lot to be thankful for.

In the wake of these storms, I have read dozens of stories about friends and neighbors and kindhearted strangers helping one another.

There was a man who lived in the apartment building that was struck by the crane I mentioned a moment ago who said he spotted a neighbor trapped inside his car in the garage, which he described as “facing straight down.” He and another neighbor said “We can’t leave him like that” and exposed themselves to danger to pull the man through the back window and help him escape safely.

A neighborhood in East Dallas came together to help a woman cut and remove trees that fell over her home, saving her a lot of time and money.

Even though the neighborhood is dealing with widespread power outages, one person with a generator has kept a refrigerator on with the community’s groceries.

I also read about restaurant workers who helped a woman from Frisco whose car had been hit by a falling tree. While the woman and her 3-year-old niece were able to escape the vehicle, her friend was trapped inside. The employees at this restaurant ran into the storm to help lift the tree so her friend could escape. They then gave her food, blankets, and even drove them to a nearby Target so they could find some dry clothes.

The restaurant owner downplayed their actions saying:

I don’t think we really did anything out of the ordinary that anybody else wouldn’t do. We were just being good Samaritans.

I am grateful for the Good Samaritans across Texas who put themselves in harm’s way in order to help their neighbors. As I said earlier, in times of tragedy or hardship, it is heartwarming to see stories like these that remind us of how lucky we are, in Texas and across the country, to live in supportive communities.

In closing, I want to thank the first responders, utility workers, and newfound friends who have supported one another through these storms. I will continue to keep the families of those killed and injured in my prayers, and I hope power will soon be fully restored.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. PORTMAN. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Mr. PORTMAN. Madam President, I am on the floor again today to talk about developing the American workforce. Why? Because it is such a big issue back home in Ohio and around the country.

Pro-growth Federal policies, including tax cuts, have really worked. I just had another group of Ohio small businesspeople visiting me today, telling me how they have taken those tax savings and used them to invest in their workers, invest in machine and technology, helping to create more economic growth. It is working.

The most recent report released by the Commerce Department shows that the economy grew by 3.1 percent in the first quarter this year. That is significant. By the way, it is about twice what was projected for that same quarter prior to tax reform being put into place. So we are doing about twice as well as the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office thought we would be doing at this point.

Official unemployment is now 3.6 percent. That is tied for the lowest in 50 years. We continue to see solid wage growth, including better wage growth—which is really exciting for me—among people who are not, as I said, supervisory employees; in other words, blue-collar workers, a 3.4-percent increase in wages. That is after about a decade and a half of flat wages when you take inflation into account. Finally, we are seeing a real increase in wages.

I hear from our small business owners back in Ohio how this is working for them, but I also hear something else, which is that they are looking for workers.

The good news is, the economy is growing. There is a demand for workers, but that is not the whole story. We are still seeing a lot of individuals who are missing out on the benefits of a growing economy, not working, and not even looking for work. I have visited dozens of factories and businesses