Recently, journalists have begun to examine John Kerry’s attempt to woo the “veterans vote”—a voting block united by their shared military experience that is thought to drive political behavior above and beyond their individual socio-demographic characteristics. Conventional wisdom suggests that the Republican leaning veterans ought to be a ripe target for the combat decorated Kerry. The New York Times, the Washington Post, CNN, and the Los Angeles Times have all referenced the importance of this voting block. Indeed, the recent attacks on Kerry’s service record seem designed to try to diminish his appeal to this group. However, recent research calls this received wisdom into question.

Political scientists have been unusually quiet on this subject because the instruments and data needed to study this question are scarce. Recently, however, data have become available that allow for the systematic examination of the veterans vote. The startling results suggest that the veterans vote does not exist.

In order to investigate this question I examined exit poll results from over 20 presidential, gubernatorial, senatorial, and congressional elections from 1992 and 2002. These elections include races between Republican and Democrats who are veterans and non-veterans such that all possible combinations of veteran status and partisanship are examined, thereby suggesting that the findings are not driven by the veteran status of any single candidate in a particular race. These analyses suggest that, while veterans are slightly more likely to vote for Republicans, vote choice is rooted in party identification, race, political ideology and gender. In not a single election is military service a significant predictor of the Republican candidate’s vote. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that the veterans vote even exists.

An excellent case in point can be seen in the 2002 Florida gubernatorial election which pitted Democrat and veteran Bill McBride against the Republican, non-veteran incumbent Jeb Bush. This race is especially instructive because veterans constitute about 20% of the Florida electorate and given the disparity in military service and its emphasis in the campaign, it should have provided a litmus test of their ability to swing an election. Using extensive television advertising, McBride repeatedly emphasized his exemplary military service. The salience of McBride’s service was further heightened when Governor Bush referred to McBride’s military service when asked in a debate what he most admired about his opponent.

Despite what appeared to be a terrific advantage in McBride’s ability to appeal to veterans, about 59% of veterans supported the governor, a level of support only slightly above his 56% support of the general electorate and almost identical to the 60% of partisan veterans that call themselves Republican. Indeed, the absence of a veterans vote seems largely attributable to the similarity between veterans and society as a whole.

While there is little evidence supporting the concept of the veterans vote, there are other ways that appealing to veterans may benefit candidates. The themes and imagery used to appeal to veterans—such as highlighting a candidate’s service—seem quite likely to appeal to a general public that rates security issues among the most important of the day. Moreover, it is possible that a talented politician may come along and find some
message that galvanizes veterans and incites them to vote based on their shared military experience. For now, however, the veterans vote remains AWOL.