

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

The U.S. Postal Service Was Designed to Serve Democracy

The 2020 Election Could Depend on Its Success

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The 2020 election has pushed a long-neglected institution into the national spotlight: the United States Postal Service (USPS). In the months leading up to the election, Postmaster General Louis DeJoy initiated reforms to cut expenses throughout the postal system. Those changes delayed mail delivery nationwide and sparked fears of voter disenfranchisement. At the same time, U.S. President Donald Trump assailed vote-by-mail and the Postal Service, falsely asserting that mail-in voting could lead to large-scale voter fraud. Despite those criticisms, as of October 22, nearly 50 million Americans have already cast their ballots by mail.

The 2020 election is hardly the first time that the postal system has strengthened American democracy. Since 1775, the U.S. Postal Service has undertaken a distinct mission to provide a public service to all Americans and promote civic engagement. The agency's proclaimed purpose is "to bind the nation together," and its unofficial motto embraces its role as "enlarger of the common life." In contrast, the modest mission of the European Union's postal systems—"to ensure that affordable, high quality and efficient postal services are available throughout the EU"—is much closer to the international norm. The United States is distinct in ascribing to its postal system the lofty aspiration of promoting democratic ideals.

Such ambitions have not insulated the USPS from attack. Critics have long lambasted this government service as obsolete and costly, and some have even called for privatization. But these critics miss an important point. The U.S. Mail provides a crucial democratic service as the one form of communication that serves all Americans regardless of location or income. The Postal Service will remain essential so long as it remains a public institution with an inclusive social mission.

A DEMOCRATIC SERVICE

From the moment of its founding in 1775, a novel principle differentiated the U.S. postal system from its colonial predecessor. Great Britain expected its postal system to generate profit for the crown. In contrast, the U.S. post office used its revenues to extend and improve service. That shift ensured the growth of a network that served Americans across the vast new country, from farmers on the remote nineteenth-century frontier to today's workers on Alaska's isolated northern slope.

This historical emphasis on strengthening service—instead of generating revenue—allowed a web of postal routes to grow alongside the American people. In 1789, only 75 post offices and fewer than 2,000 miles of post roads served a nation of 3.5 million people across 500,000 square miles. Because revenues were used to expand the postal system, the number of post offices increased to more than 900 by 1800. In the same period, the length of post roads increased more than tenfold to almost 21,000 miles.

The new American postal system strove to reach every citizen. But because the population was sparse over great expanses, many farmers had to travel long distances to reach the nearest post office. When the superintendent of the U.S. Census Office declared the frontier settled in 1890, the U.S. Post Office Department began experimenting with rural free delivery, a home mail delivery service for farmers. Petitions and letters requesting this service poured into Washington, D.C., and in 1902, RFD became a permanent feature of American life, providing a lifeline to even the most inaccessible reaches of the continent.

The U.S. Mail provides a crucial democratic service.

The small-town post office remains a central institution in thousands of American villages, crossroads, and hamlets to this day. In many of these communities, the local post office is the only public space where residents regularly encounter one another. Operating these post offices—generally at some financial loss—can be the most visible role the federal government plays in rural areas, and it reflects the state’s democratic commitment to serve all of its citizens.

Since its inception, the U.S. postal system has promoted civic engagement by prioritizing the distribution of news and political information. In 1791, President George Washington stressed the importance of “diffusing a knowledge of the laws and proceedings of the Government.” To that end, in 1792, the U.S. Congress passed a law that made mailing newspapers particularly affordable: a newspaper could travel 100 miles for merely one cent. This preferential treatment helped newspapers proliferate. By 1840, Americans printed more newspapers than any other nation in the world—more than twice as many as Great Britain, whose population was then of similar size. Even today, the USPS transports periodicals and books at reduced rates in order to advance knowledge and civic life.

HERE TO STAY

Critics have long suggested that advances in communications technology would soon render the post office an anachronism. The telegraph in 1837 and the telephone in 1876 were each at one time expected to displace the U.S. Mail. Fax machines became standard office equipment in the 1980s, leading critics to make similar predictions. Yet even today the Postal Service delivers 472 million pieces of mail to 160 million addresses six days a week. Meanwhile, the telephone long ago evolved into a complement to mail rather than a replacement; Western Union stopped transmitting telegrams in 2006; and the fax machine has become more of a niche medium than a communications necessity.

Modern critics in politics and business point to electronic messaging in declaring the venerable U.S. mail service obsolete and relegating it to the status of “snail mail.” Chris Edwards of the

libertarian Cato Institute said in 2005, “Fast, reliable, and cost-efficient communications is vital to the business world and today’s lifestyles. The government postal service does not provide such communications, nor is it ever likely to.” In a 2011 column for *Forbes*, Adam Hartung took a more generous view of the Postal Service but arrived at a similar conclusion. “The Post Office is really good at what it does,” he acknowledged. “We just don’t need it. No more than we need a good horse shoe.”

But those who have declared the post office’s demise fail to acknowledge its importance as a democratic public service. The U.S. Mail is the one means of communication that all Americans can access, and local post offices remain a vital center of many American communities. Digital communications are out of reach for millions of Americans who are elderly, low-income, rural, or disabled. Less than half of households with incomes under \$30,000 have broadband Internet, and rural residents are 12 percentage points less likely to have such services than Americans as a whole. In a period of widening economic inequality, the uniform service that the U.S. Mail provides to all Americans is a democratic good.

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The U.S. Postal Service continues to operate as a democratic public service even as postal systems elsewhere have moved toward a for-profit model. The EU directed member states to make their postal markets competitive by 2013, a move that unleashed pressures to reduce services. Many post offices in Europe have closed. Between 2000 and 2016, three out of eight post offices in the United Kingdom were shuttered.

Such deregulation would have a dramatic effect on the United States if Washington, D.C., were to undertake it. The United States is more economically unequal, with greater territory and larger geographic variation than Europe. If the Postal Service were driven to court high-profit markets at the expense of those with fewer resources, the nation’s universal service model would fracture. The customers who generate the lowest returns—and who often happen to need the postal system the most—would be left with the least service.

CALM IN CRISIS

The U.S. presidential election has laid bare the importance of the Postal Service. With hundreds of sorting facilities, more than 30,000 post offices, a fleet of more than 228,000 delivery vehicles, and almost 500,000 career employees, the postal system can contact every household and business in the United States on a daily basis. This crucial component of the national infrastructure has swung into action, allowing millions of Americans to take advantage of vote-by-mail this fall during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite a burdensome mandate to prefund its retiree health benefits, decades of underinvestment, and recent ill-conceived operational cutbacks, this government service is displaying its extraordinary capabilities to the American public.

Postal workers can play a pivotal role not only in elections but also in health security efforts. In April, the federal government formulated a plan to distribute five free masks to every U.S.

household through the postal system. The White House ultimately nixed this program, but the assignment would not have been out of bounds for postal workers. Following the 2001 terrorist attacks, volunteer letter carriers trained to distribute medication in the event of a biological emergency. Given the Postal Service's vast reach, it is well adapted to assume critical functions during future national crises.

Simply by performing its daily operations—providing uniform service at uniform rates—the United States Postal Service has a democratizing effect. Its remarkable infrastructure has value both in moments of crisis and as a standard feature of American life. Democratic public service, with an inclusive social mission, is not a concept easily outmoded—nor is the U.S. Mail.