

# The Detroit News

## Opinion: USPS needs overhaul to keep election politics off the mail route

Jeffrey Miron and Erin Partin

August 27, 2020

The United States Postal Service is currently at the center of a highly politicized debate gripping the nation.

Recent reductions in overtime allowances, rigid adherence to delivery schedules and retiring of infrastructure like sorting machines and mail drop boxes have allegedly caused delays in mail delivery and led to concerns that these policies are being implemented to suppress mail-in voting this November. USPS defenders, however, suggest that delays have been occurring for months due to the pandemic, and note that overall year-to-date on-time delivery performance remains comparable to 2019.

Regardless of the cause of recent delays, the USPS is long overdue for extensive reforms. The current system leaves too much control of a vital service in the hands of government appointees, leading to inefficiencies, waste and political bickering. It is inevitable that, especially during a contentious election cycle, an organization as vital to voting and as intertwined with partisan politics would face controversy.

The USPS is long overdue reforms as the current system provides too much control to government appointees, the authors write.

In the 2016 election, 57.2 million people voted early, absentee or by mail. In 2020, due to the coronavirus, that number will almost certainly be higher. Free and fair elections are crucial in well-functioning democracies, and the president's suggestion that his administration's priorities include damaging citizens' ability to vote is unsettling at best.

For months the president has claimed that voting by mail is rife with fraud without offering evidence. Despite pushback from Twitter — including messages warning that his statements violate Twitter's terms of service — he has persisted. In recent remarks, President Donald Trump expressed opposition to including emergency funding to the USPS in a coronavirus package, saying, "They need that money in order to make the post office work, so it can take all of these millions and millions of ballots. If we don't make a deal, that means they don't get the money. That means they can't have universal mail-in voting."

Whether the recent policy changes at USPS are a part of a nefarious plan to suppress voter turnout is not clear. The recently appointed postmaster general, Louis DeJoy, testified before Congress this week, pushing back on allegations that recent mail delays were a result of changes he implemented. An internal USPS memo dated July 10 details many changes to delivery protocols — including limits on extra trips — and acknowledges that, “we may see mail left behind or mail on the workroom floor or docks.”

But DeJoy argues that many of these changes are a part of a long-term plan to ensure the financial health of the USPS, and one that predated his appointment. Under public pressure and congressional scrutiny, DeJoy has agreed to halt further changes to USPS operational practices until after the election.

Setting aside the current controversy, however, the USPS does need substantial reform— in particular, changes that will insulate it from politics. The USPS operates as a government sponsored monopoly, harming competitors and costing American taxpayers billions of dollars. The vast majority of mail in the U.S. is advertising mail. Personal letters make up less than 5% of all mail, and as more payment and billing systems shift online, those shares are declining as well.

One concern is that certain segments of the population, rural and elderly residents in particular, would be harmed by service reductions or an elimination of the Universal Service Obligation (USO), which obliges the USPS to “provide all aspects of universal service at affordable prices.” But the data do not support this conclusion.

Since 2010, the proportion of Americans with access to broadband internet increased from 74.5% to 93.5%. Young people check, sort and read their mail far less frequently than older generations. The USPS has been an American institution for two and a half centuries, but over that period technology and habits have changed the way people communicate; it is long past time that the USPS adapt to an evolving marketplace.

The current debate about USPS’ role in the election would not be happening if the USPS had been privatized or eliminated long ago, since private mail carriers are not be subject to the whims of government. Safeguarding the integrity of this election is a priority. But considering real, robust reforms to the postal system in the United States must also be part of the conversation.

*Jeffrey Miron is the director of economic studies at the Cato Institute, and the director of graduate and undergraduate studies in the economics department at Harvard University. Erin Partin is a research associate at the Cato Institute.*