



The Postal Service is flawed, but it can deliver our ballots

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As we head toward a contentious national election, an unlikely agency in the United States Postal Service has come into the crosshairs. Since the Founding Fathers gave Congress the power to establish post offices and post roads, the postal department has been known mainly for its letter carriers who, as the motto goes, can't be dissuaded from their tasks by snow, rain, heat, nor gloom of night.

Apparently, though, people now are concerned about whether those same trusty carriers can reliably deliver their ballots. The fear is understandable, at least on the surface. The presidential election is likely to be a nail-biter. Because of the COVID-19 crisis, several states have expanded voters' ability to cast ballots by mail. The president has stirred the pot by alleging, largely without evidence, that mail voting leads to election fraud.

To make matters worse, the Postal Service's implementation of operational changes (the removal of mail-sorting machines and a reduction of mailboxes in certain locales) has caused Democrats to allege that the Republican administration is sabotaging the Postal Service. Yet, those operational changes are largely rote, given that the Postal Service has been reducing the number of mailboxes for years. "As far back as 2012, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office said the Post Office needed to reduce its paper mail sorting network to respond to the decreased mail volume," wrote Kevin Kosar in a recent *Politico* column. The Postal Service, he notes, received high marks for its handling of the 2018 election.

Nevertheless, federal Judge Victor Marrero of New York on Sept. 20 ordered Postmaster General Louis DeJoy to halt those changes and prioritize ballots. "The right to vote is too vital a value in our democracy to be left in a state of suspense in the minds of voters weeks before a presidential election," he ruled. That should set aside fears that there are no checks on whatever it is the postmaster general is doing.

This fracas is driven by partisan fears. Both parties have depicted the Nov. 3 contest as a Flight 93 election, a reference to a widely read 2016 column. The author compared that election to the United Airlines flight that crashed in a Pennsylvania field after passengers rushed the al Qaeda terrorists who commandeered the cockpit. Once again, partisans argue that unless they take control of the White House, the republic will crash.

Whatever one's views about the election's importance, there's no reason to fear the Postal Service will be the source of the problem. The Postal Service has myriad flaws and inefficiencies caused by its bureaucratic character. It has weathered controversies over the decades. The USPS is ripe for reform, but the same agency that delivers your IRS refund check, legal documents, and utility bill can safely deliver your ballot.

As news reports explain, USPS delivers 143 billion — that's with a “b” — pieces of mail a year. Around 160 million voters will participate in the election, with around half of them relying on mail-in ballots. That means local registrars will send 80 million ballots to voters. Not every voter will return a ballot, and many will hand-deliver them to a polling station. But, even if we assume an additional 160 million ballots (80 million sent to homes and 80 million returned to election officials), that means a mere 0.11 boost in volume.

The Postal Service is perfectly capable of handling that trifling increase. Despite congressional fights over additional funding for the Postal Service, it has plenty of cash with \$13 billion in reserves, has more coming in from Congress, and has added staff to meet the expected surge. There surely will be voting hitches, but no more than the usual hitches one finds at polling stations or election offices.

Again, the Postal Service has plenty of deficiencies. It ran an \$8.8 billion deficit in 2019. The Postal Service is paid to deliver goods for online retailers, but it continues to watch its core business sag as more people rely on the internet and private delivery services. Kosar notes that the agency has a \$150 billion in unfunded retiree-related liabilities, something that is eating into its operations and leading Congress to eye additional bailouts.

The USPS needs to deal with these liabilities and shed some of its antiquated work rules. Perhaps it's time to rethink the rules requiring the agency to deliver mail six days a week. Although the concept of a post office was included in the Constitution, the libertarian Cato Institute notes that there's nothing saying it must be operated in its current fashion. The group calls for the Postal Service's privatization.

So, there's plenty to argue about with regard to the Postal Service, but there should be no argument over whether it can deliver sensitive and important mail, election ballots included. We should spend less time worrying about whether to entrust the Postal Service and more time thinking about the candidates we will entrust with elected office.