# Weaponizing the Post Office

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16.08.2020 doi: https://doi.org/10.17176/20200816-154644-0

In our pandemic-addled moment, many once-normal activities are now considered dangerous. Hugging hello. Teaching in a classroom. Attending a concert. Having friends over to our homes. And now in the US, we have something else to add to the list of once-normal things that are risky in the pandemic: Voting by mail.

As the 3 November presidential election approaches with the pandemic raging out of control, the US Postal Service has announced that it cannot guarantee that mailed ballots posted before the election will be delivered to election officials on time to be counted. Many more people are going to be voting by mail this year, given that the virus still lurks everywhere. Huge numbers of mailed ballots should not be a problem since the US post office handles an even bigger Christmas crush each year. But the post office may fail us in the upcoming election because President Trump has weaponized it.

The United States has famously flawed elections. We invented gerrymandering. We require voters to register and sometimes to register again when election officials legally purge their names from the voter rolls. We deploy rickety election technology that features hackable voting machines and the absence of a paper trail for recounts. Ballot designers sometimes aim to deliberately confuse voters. We run our major elections on regular weekdays that are not national holidays. Dark money sloshes through our election campaigns because our Supreme Court thinks that money is speech. Social media flood public attention with fake news of undisclosed provenance. Our election officials are often elected on partisan platforms and they sometimes simultaneously occupy major roles in political campaigns. Sometimes they are even candidates in elections that they are charged with supervising.

Voting by mail was perhaps the least contested and most uncontroversial feature of US elections. In most states it has been relatively easy to get a ballot sent to your home, so you could cast your vote and append your signature to the privacy envelope that allows your identity to be confirmed before your ballot is anonymously counted. Once you filled in your ballot, you could drop it in any postbox for delivery to election officials. Easy. Fraud-free.

Until now.

Under President Trump, the US Postal Service – USPS or just the "post office" – has become politicized in the president's increasingly no-holds-barred campaign to stay in office even as his poll numbers sink. Seeing that the out-of-control pandemic was going to make voting by mail the safest way to cast a ballot in the 3 November presidential election, Trump saw an opening. If he could block the delivery of the mailed ballots cast against him, he could be victorious. But how would he know which ballots to block?

It's not hard to tell. Not everyone in the US is equally panicked in the pandemic. In May 2020, Pew Research found that 82% of Democratic voters thought that the coronavirus outbreak was a major threat to the health of the population as a whole while only 43% of Republicans did. Nearly three-quarters of Democrats thought that not enough people were following social distancing measures, while only 36% of conservative Republicans did. In short, Republicans are not nearly as afraid of the virus as Democrats are. We can see this in styles of governance. States with Republican governors have been slower and less comprehensive in taking steps to control the virus while states with Democratic governors have generally followed the advice of scientists and taken more extreme measures. And of course, as I have argued before on this blog, President Trump completely dropped the ball when it came to countering the pandemic at federal level and many of his supporters love him for it. Even in late July, as the country

recorded shattering numbers of new infections, fully 81% of Republicans approved of how Trump was handling his job.

The partisan divide over the virus's dangers affects how people will vote. Polled about how they prefer to cast their ballots, more than two-thirds of Republicans said that they prefer to vote in person while almost two-thirds of Democrats prefer to vote by mail. Mailed ballots, in short, are disproportionately likely to be Democratic ballots. If the President can prevent many of those mailed ballots from being delivered and counted, he can win on the basis of Republican votes cast in person in defiance of the virus.

In May 2020, as this partisan split on mailed ballots emerged, Trump appointed a new Postmaster General, Louis DeJoy. DeJoy is a mega-donor to Trump's own reelection campaign whose only experience in postal matters comes from the fact that he holds large blocks of shares in private companies that compete with the post office.

Problems at the post office did not start with DeJoy's appointment, though. For years, the USPS has lost money and struggled to keep up with technology while the popular phrase "going postal" describes people who become uncontrollably angry and shoot up their workplaces. The pandemic added more tragedy to trouble, as the post office struggled keep its employees healthy and mail delivery safe during the pandemic when too many postal workers succumbed to the virus as front-line workers. The post office is funded by a combination of grudging and irregular government subsidies and regulated rates for services that never allow the operation to break even. The post office, in short, was already economically fragile and showing signs of strain when Trump decided to politicize it.

At first, Postmaster DeJoy said he would address financial problems at the post office with austerity measures and efforts to promote efficiency. He instructed postal workers to stop at the ends of their shifts even if all mail had not all been sorted and pick-ups had not been completed. He eliminated overtime pay for workers, creating huge backlogs of undelivered mail. As the president of the American Postal Workers' Union said in an interview with the Atlantic: "They're ordering workers to leave mail for another day. That goes against our DNA."

DeJoy ordered post offices to open later and to close completely during the lunch hour, to save on labor costs, something that also made the post offices less accessible. Functions were consolidated so that fewer post offices offered a complete range of postal services. DeJoy also instituted a hiring freeze across the institution, even though the post office had become extremely short-staffed as its front-line workers fell victim to COVID-19.

On Friday 7 August, DeJoy carried out his "Friday night massacre," reassigning or firing more than two dozen of the top officials at the post office, including both the Chief Financial Officer and the General Counsel, both career employees who had challenged DeJoy's initiatives. As DeJoy negotiated a stand-by loan from the Treasury Department to keep the post office going, DeJoy agreed as part of the deal to turn over to the US Treasury Secretary the proprietary contracts specifying the terms that the USPS negotiated with its 10 largest private sector shippers, who contract with the post office to provide "last mile" delivery from distribution centers to customers' homes. Trump had long been publicly threatening to cancel the contract that the post office has with mega-retailer Amazon. Trump's threat was widely seen as targeting Amazon owner Jeff Bezos, who also owns the Washington Post, a paper critical of Trump.

Then DeJoy began ordering changes that no one could rationally explain. He commanded the destruction of many expensive mail-sorting machines in the main regional centers of the USPS, machines that process the bulk of the post office's load which consists of commercial mail stamped with bar codes that make the mail easier to automatically direct to its destination. Documents reveal that DeJoy was planning to eliminate 20 % of all mail-handling machines in the system. As late as 14 August, postal employees said that machines were still being destroyed; machines worth hundreds of thousands of dollars were simply thrown in dumpsters. The mail that had once been sorted by machine now suddenly had to be sorted by

hand in a system in which overtime work was forbidden.

DeJoy attacked the mailboxes. Eyewitnesses in Oregon, which years ago eliminated in-person voting in favor of all-mail balloting, reported that unmarked tractor-trailers were pulling up to the familiar blue USPS mailboxes, unbolting them from sidewalks and carrying them away. After a huge public outcry, the post office announced on 15 August that it would stop removing mailboxes until after the November election. That proved to be too difficult to hide.

With this multipronged attack on the post office, the pickup and delivery of mail has slowed down dramatically throughout the system. The delays seemed most severe in the "election battleground" states which Trump won very narrowly in 2016, giving him his margin of victory in the electoral college. As the New York Times reported:

> *In Ohio, where mail voting is likely to double, piles of undelivered mail are sitting in a Cleveland distribution facility. In rural Michigan, diabetes medicine that used to arrive in three days now takes almost two weeks. In the Milwaukee area, dozens of trailers filled with packages are left behind every day. In New Glarus, Wis., the owners of the Maple Leaf Cheese and Chocolate Haus are worried their cheese will go bad now that deliveries that used to take two to three days are taking twice that.*

If Democratic ballots from those key states can be systematically delayed in the mail, then Trump might be able to win those states again with the votes of Republicans who plan to show up in person. With Trump's poll numbers sinking, blatant voter suppression may be his last hope.

The US mail system is obviously disintegrating in plain sight. Nevertheless it was a shock when postal officials on Friday 14 August told election officials in 46 out of 50 states that the post office could not guarantee that voters' ballots would be returned on time. It is very late to design an alternative system. Some are suggesting that election officials place dedicated drop boxes for ballots in strategic places so that voters can return their ballots somewhere that has nothing to do with the post office. The design of an alternative system will rely on state election officials, who are often affiliated with particular parties. An examination of voter suppression efforts in the 2018 midterm election showed that lines were longest and polls were most short-staffed in minority communities, and one might guess that drop boxes for ballots will not be better distributed two years later.

Can't someone stop the post office from being dismantled in plain sight, on the eve of an election in which record numbers of mailed ballots will be cast? In Article 1, Section 8, the US Constitution gives the power to establish post offices to Congress. So how can the President unilaterally destroy the institution? The answer is money.

Democrats who control the House of Representatives voted to provide $25 billion months ago to shore up the post office so that it could do its job properly through the election. But the Senate, controlled by Republicans, has refused to engage the question. Of course, both houses of Congress must agree on spending, and the president must sign the deal. At first Republican reluctance to allocate money for the post office seemed like an oversight. And then on 13 August, the president came right out and said that he opposes providing more money for the post office because he wants to restrict how many Americans can vote by mail. He actually said it out loud on television.

So now there is no mystery about what is going on. The post office is being destroyed in order to prevent Americans from having their votes counted in November. The postal workers' union and many individual postal workers are speaking out about the threats they are under. It is clear that they are willing to work hard to deliver ballots if they are allowed to do it.

The post office's motto has long been: "Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds." If Americans can figure out how to save the post office in time to get mailed ballots safely counted on 3 November, then we may have to supplement the

motto to add that the ambition of a president to be leader for life doesn't stop the post office either. Otherwise, we are in deep trouble.




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SUGGESTED CITATION

Scheppele, Kim Lane: Weaponizing the Post Office, Verfassungsblog, 16.08.2020, doi: https://doi.org/10.17176/20200816-154644-0.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17176/20200816-154644-0.