

Cutting back the U.S. Postal Service would hurt the lifeblood of democracy

The agency binds us together, and benefits all Americans.

By **Richard R. John** and **Joseph Turow**
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Critics of President Trump’s repeated denunciation of the U.S. Postal Service — and his unwillingness to adequately fund it — fault him for trying to rig an election in which public confidence in mail-in voting may well determine the margin of victory and the public’s acceptance of the results. This is certainly true.

But something even more fundamental is at stake. By attacking one of the nation’s best-loved and most admired organizations, Trump is putting the circulatory system of the body politic in a potentially lethal chokehold that could threaten our future long after the election — no matter who wins.

Our nation’s Founders intended the post office to bind us together. The physician and philosopher Benjamin Rush put it best. The post office, Rush wrote in 1787, in defending the post office clause in the U.S. Constitution, was the “only means of conveying heat and light to every individual in the federal commonwealth.” The Post Office Department, as the organization was then called, has filled that role admirably for well over 200 years.

It was the post office that, beginning in 1792, circulated millions of newspapers filled with political information throughout the country at rates far lower than the cost of their delivery, helping a far-flung people stay in touch with the centers of power. It was the post office that for a short but critical interval in the 1830s emboldened antislavery groups to flood the slaveholding states with abolitionist literature. It was the post office that during the Civil War and every war since helped battle-weary soldiers reach out to their loved ones — and to vote.

The establishment of parcel post in 1913 furthered the mission of the post office to serve all Americans by permitting rural customers to receive merchandise from industrial cities that previously had been prohibitively expensive to ship. Three years earlier, the post office even began a successful decades-long experiment with postal banking for Americans who lacked access to credit, a project whose revival hold great promise today.

The Postal Service also fostered innovation. Mail contracting subsidies jump-started new modes of transportation — from the stagecoach lines in the early republic to the airlines in the 1920s. More recently, the Postal Service has been a leader in the rollout of optical scanning, facilitating the high-speed processing of millions of letters and packages, jump-starting a logistical revolution that has transformed business and industry.

The Postal Service, therefore, like all successful organizations, has changed with the times. Americans no longer rely on mail carriers for up-to-date news, yet direct mail is still vital in election campaigns. More people today write emails than send letters, yet the Postal Service remains indispensable for the millions of Americans who rely on it to obtain prescription drugs. Philanthropies depend on mass mailings to stay in touch with their members, while businesses use it to stay connected with their customers and suppliers.

Almost every American today relies on the Postal Service in one way or another. According to one recent [study](#), the mailing industry accounts for almost 5 percent of all U.S. jobs and supports \$1.6 trillion in sales revenue, more than oil and natural gas combined. Almost half of all the world's mail originates in the United States, and the USPS works closely with FedEx, UPS and other private carriers to provide essential, and often very expensive, “last mile” connections to remote locations, a service that is particularly vital in a country as vast and thinly settled as the United States. These same rural areas often lack the level of digital connectivity that urbanites and suburbanites take for granted, making these facilities all the more essential.

Despite this impressive track record, the Postal Service has become a target for free market think tanks convinced that corporate America could run the USPS better than the government. When similar arguments arose in the past, they invariably failed, and for a simple reason: The Postal Service provides facilities no other carrier can match. Why? Because no other organization has a constitutional mandate to bind the nation and none could match the level of service the USPS provides the entire population at a comparable price. This was true in the 1840s, when for a fleeting moment postal privatization found its way onto the public agenda, galvanizing Congress to lower postal rates and restructure its funding scheme to keep the organization running. It is still true today.

Yet few of even the most ardent privatizers have gone so far as Trump in disparaging the organization as it currently exists. In fact, the Postal Service's defenders include not only rivals such as FedEx and UPS, but also high-volume shippers like Amazon (The Post is owned by Jeff Bezos, who is also chief executive and founder of Amazon). It is not hard to understand why. The Postal Service delivers packages to a multitude of locations that no private carrier could profitably serve.

At a moment in our history when the nation is reeling under the impact of a global pandemic, it is the height of folly to risk any further disruption to the supply chains upon which our well-being relies. It is a reminder that for Trump, the bottom line is neither the well-being of the republic nor the values of our Founders.

Ensuring a thriving future for an organization that has long made America great will benefit both American business and American consumers. It is also the right thing to do. The United States remains as it always has been — an experiment in self-government. And for more than two centuries, lawmakers have invested the post office with a civic mandate to link the government and the governed. To enable Americans to vote in a safe and reliable manner without risk to their personal safety is not a partisan issue. In fact, it is precisely the kind of task that the Founders looked to the post office to perform.

We expect our lawmakers to keep our economy humming and our electoral process secure. Yet the health of the Postal Service is ultimately not merely about our GDP, or even about the sanctity of a presidential election. It is also about the future of what Abraham Lincoln once called the “mystic chords of memory” that unite us as a people. The United States, like all nations, is an imagined community that lives in the minds and hearts of millions of people who will never meet in person. In an age in which partisanship rules the airwaves, and the citizenry is bitterly divided over matters large and small, the reassuring presence of letter carriers and mail delivery trucks is a constant reminder that we remain *e pluribus unum*. Like the water we drink or the air we breath, the circulation of letters and parcels is an encouraging sign that, however compromised our autoimmune system may be, our vital organs remain sound.

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