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The Left Lauded Voting by Mail in 2020, but Now It's a Bipartisan Concern

Fred Lucas | September 18, 2024

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The U.S. Postal Service must correct issues such as "lost or delayed election mail and front-line training deficiencies," election officials warn. (Tetra Images/Getty Images)

In the 2020 presidential election, the Left staunchly promoted voting by mail and scoffed at critics of the option. In 2024, however, Democrat and Republican election officials, as well as an inspector general, are raising concerns about whether the U.S. Postal Service is prepared for mail-in ballots.

Last week, election officials from both major parties expressed concern about mail-in ballots, the same week the National Letter Carriers Association—which represents 290,000 active and retired mail carriers —endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris for president. In July, the American Postal Workers Union, representing 200,000 Postal Service employees, endorsed Harris.

Earlier this year, the Postal Service Office of Inspector General expressed concern about the "risk of delays in the processing and delivery" of election-related mail as well as "operational changes that pose a risk of individual ballots not being counted."

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However, U.S. Postmaster General Louis DeJoy insists that he is "confident in our Election and Government Mail Services group, and in the robust plans we have in place."

During the pandemic election year of 2020, 43% of voters participated by mail, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission—almost twice as many who voted by mail in each previous presidential election, 2012 and 2016, when about one-quarter sealed their ballots in envelopes.

Voting by mail isn't likely to be as high for the Nov. 5 presidential election, said Ken Cuccinelli, national chairman of the Election Transparency Initiative. But the volume of mailed ballots is expected to be substantially high, he said.

Ballots that leave a voter's state pose a significant problem for election mail, Cuccinelli said, adding that he doesn't view the Postal Service as ready.

Delays are caused by changes in shipping, said Cuccinelli, former attorney general of Virginia and acting deputy secretary of homeland security during the Trump administration.

"For election mail, if you don't have a postmark by Election Day, it won't be counted in most states," Cuccinelli told The Daily Signal. "A lot of people think that the day you put it in the mail is the day that it's postmarked. That's not true. Depending on where you live will determine where the mail is taken. It sometimes will leave the state and then return."

The Election Integrity Network, a coalition of state groups focused on clean elections, has a national working group that identified vulnerabilities after looking at the postal system, said Ned Jones, director of the Citizens Election Research Center at a think tank called the Virginia Institute for Public Policy.

Jones said continuing problems include poor tracking of ballots (also known as "chain of custody"), no "reconciliation" of ballots received by voters and ballots delivered to election offices; and ballots delivered to voters who no longer live at their registered address.

Reforms of regional processing have caused "built-in delays" after the U.S. Postal Service launched its Delivering for America initiative in 2021. That 10-year plan, designed to make the USPS more efficient, includes processing more mail through large regional centers.

"Mail will leave the state and then comes back. There are so many problems with this system beyond what the inspector general reports said," Jones told The Daily Signal. "There is a lack of security and no chain of custody. Undeliverable ballots go to addresses where the people no longer live."

During the 2020 presidential election, more than 1.1 million mailed ballots were "undeliverable," according to a study by the Public Interest Legal Foundation, an election watchdog group.

A total of 29 state and local elections officials last week signed a letter to DeJoy, the postmaster general, flagging their concerns about "processing facility operations, lost or delayed election mail, and front-line training deficiencies."

The lead signers of the letter were Minnesota Secretary of State Steve Simon, a Democrat who is president of the National Association of Secretaries of State, and Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, a Republican who is president-elect of the association for the coming year.

NASS and the National Association of State Election Directors coordinated the letter to the postmaster general, which also notes "exceptionally long delivery times" for ballots mailed back to election offices.

"In nearly every state, however, local election officials are receiving timely postmarked ballots well after Election Day and well outside the three to five business days USPS claims as the first class delivery standard," the letter to DeJoy says. "For example, election officials in multiple states report receiving anywhere from dozens to hundreds of ballots 10 or more days after postmark."

The letter adds: "Election officials report mail sent to voters is being marked as undeliverable at higher than usual rates, even in cases where a voter is known not to have moved."

Despite such criticism, the Postal Service contends that in the 2020 election it delivered 99.89% of ballots from voters to election officials within seven days. In the 2022 midterm election it delivered 99.93% of ballots within seven days.

DeJoy is scheduled to speak Thursday about election readiness in a briefing for the media and the public.

The Postal Service referred The Daily Signal to a letter in which DeJoy responded to the two organizations.

DeJoy wrote that many of the issues they raised were addressed previously. The reforms should not affect election mail, he said.

"Let us reiterate, modernization and enhancement plans will not have an impact on election mail, and we have committed to limit network changes to avoid any unintended disruption in service for the upcoming election and peak season," DeJoy wrote, adding later: "Furthermore, as demonstrated consistently in previous elections, election mail routinely outperforms our regular service performance due to our long-standing processes and procedures."

Although Democrats championed mail-in voting in 2020, they targeted DeJoy who became postmaster general that June in the final months of the Trump administration. He stayed in the job for the Biden-Harris administration.

The Postal Service said it is implementing "extraordinary measures" or expediting delivery for election mail two weeks in advance of Election Day. The election officials asked for a month, however.

DeJoy disagreed in his letter, saying that "we implement certain processes and procedures specific to election mail all year-round, including advancing election mail ahead of other mail-in processing."

"We have determined that implementing extraordinary measures two weeks before the election provides ample time," DeJoy wrote. "That said, we are, and will continue, to look for opportunities to further improve our processes and procedures and to enhance our election mail service performance."

Last month, the USPS Office of Inspector General released an audit finding that from December 2023 through April, the Postal Service processed election and political mail almost entirely on time.

"However, as a result of our observations and inquiries, we found that Postal Service personnel did not always comply with policy and procedures regarding all clear certifications, election and political mail logs, and audit checklists," the audit says.

"In addition, we identified processes and policies that could pose a risk of delays in the processing and delivery of election and political mail," it continues. "Further, we identified issues related to some Delivering for America operational changes that pose a risk of individual ballots not being counted."