

When Efficiency Fails Equity:

USPS & Rural Underservice

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Executive Summary

This report will examine how evolving governance frameworks and public-service strategies have reshaped rural access to essential services. Broader policy shifts towards market-driven models have resulted in core public functions being outsourced, corporatized, or even completely privatized. These changes and reforms have occurred in a wide range of services: hospitals, transit systems, social services, utilities, education, and even corrections; since these market-based models prioritize profit and efficiency, they routinely leave rural communities with limited, inconsistent or unreliable service delivery.

In order to explore how rural service access is affected by governance shifts and market pressures the United States Postal Service (USPS) will function as the primary organization being analyzed; the agency's history and structure will be examined along with current governance challenges, efficiency reforms and privatization initiatives and the implications they may have in the communities that are served. Finally, to address these challenges, the report will conclude with three detailed recommendations designed to update USPS operations and funding that safeguard its public mission and reinforce its role in rural communities.

Profile of an Organization

The United States Postal Service (USPS) has continuously implemented programs designed to ensure their obligation of universal service, preserve affordability, and ensure equitable rural access. The challenge for the United States Postal Service stems from their hybrid institutional structure; requiring them to provide uniform service, yet are pressured by efficiency and market-oriented imperative (Johnson, 2017).

The United States Postal Service is legally mandated to provide service to all American

citizens, this service should be efficient, and dependable across all areas; this mandate is referred to as the Universal Service Obligation (USO). This is the primary program in which the United States Postal Service addresses the longstanding issue of rural underservice. The USO was legally codified and has subsequently been reinforced by other legislation like the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970, and the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006 (Postal Regulatory Commission, 2008). This statutory guarantee ensures that rural communities receive equitable service and counteracts the efficiency market focus, preventing sparsely populated regions from becoming service deserts. Unlike other companies, the USO prevents USPS from charging fees based on distance or terrain, it also creates uniform pricing averting the cost burden from falling onto consumers; these features reinforce the Postal Service's place as a public institution, that's dedicated to advancing equitable distribution of essential services (United States Postal Service, 2024).

The United States Postal Services (USPS) is shackled by unique legislation that determines their finances and funding. After the 1970 Postal Reorganization Act (PRA), the agency restructured, rather than relying on congressional funds they were now required to be financially self-sustaining. Henceforth funding would come from postage fees and other revenue; this did not make the organization free from political micromanaging; control of services offered, and postage rates, were still determined by Congress. After the 2006 Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA), the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC) gained substantial power in rate-review, service standards, and compliance; although congressional mandates continue to shape and constrain USPS policy and operations (Carbaugh, 2007; Werner, 1982).

The PAEA also played a role in reshaping the United States Postal Services fiscal trajectory, through mandates that include prefunded retiree benefits, and CPI-based price

capping; these requirements left the Postal Service structurally disadvantaged, prevented modernization investments, and is responsible for the institutions recurring deficits (Kosar, 2009; Montanye, 2007). With the PAEA obligations, declining mail volumes, and operational costs the United States Postal Service has found itself fiscally strained and these challenges are compounded by the institution's inability to diversify its funding sources (Carbaugh, 2007; Office of Inspector General, 2025). Legally, under federal law, the Postal Service is prohibited from introducing any new, non-postal services, which prevents the organization from entrepreneurial adaptation, forcing them to rely on traditional postage revenue (Kosar, 2009; Office of Inspector General, 2025; Werner, 1982). The United States Postal Service's financial framework is contradictory, and ironic; it must function financially, as a self-sustaining business, but it is expected to provide a universal public service.

Addressing the Public Problem

Within the context of public administration, governance can be broadly described as the mechanisms through which collective problems are managed, implemented, and evaluated (Kettl, 2002). Governance provides the framework through which private organizations, public institutions, and community stakeholders can organize and work towards common objectives. Governance has not remained static; it has evolved over time. Early on governance in the United States was through traditional bureaucracy systems, designed to ensure equality and stability, with public agencies delivering services directly (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; Gulick, 1990; Waldo, 1952).

Towards the late twentieth century New Public Management (NPM) gradually replaced this. New Public Management was market-oriented, having drawn inspiration from the private

sector. This approach adopted business methods and applied them to public governance (Savas, 2001). These reforms prioritized competition, efficiency, cost-reduction, and measurable outcomes, reframing the government from being the provider of services directly, to a facilitator. Furthermore, this period in public administration saw governments more commonly outsourcing service delivery, transitioning their role to oversight and regulation; this is believed to be related to New Public Management's principles and priorities (Riles, 2014). While efficiency had increased with NPM, the flaws and limitations of the system became visible.

Privatization can be broadly explained as transferring government responsibility of public services to private institutions, or increased dependence on the private-sector to address collective needs (Savas, 2001). Privatization itself is not a singular action but rather can be visualized as a spectrum of practices as indicated by Luck (1990). The drive for privatization of private-sector services, specifically in relation to the United States Postal Service, are often framed as a way to improve efficiency and financial performance. Yet, these reforms consider a core flaw within privatization of public services; the prioritization of market incentive over equitable service (Ryan, 1999; Starr, 1988). Privatization not only changes the management of the service it provides; it also fundamentally alters the goals, accountability, and accessibility of the original institution (Starr, 1988; Savas, 2001; Ryan, 1999; Pindus et al., 2010). Although the United States Postal Service (USPS) has not conventionally been privatized; the ongoing political pressures, financial mandates, and reforms the institution has been subjected to have steered it closer to privatization.

The United States Postal Service (USPS) operates within an unusual position in our federal system. It is a public institution mandated by law to serve every American, but it must be fiscally sustainable. The USPS is required to balance these competing logics, one focused on

public equity while the other is based on market-efficiency, but it was not always run under these constraints. The United States Postal Service was established in 1775, with Benjamin Franklin being appointed as the Postmaster General, the original intent; instrument of national governance which played a vital role in the unification of the colonies (United States Postal Service, 2008). The purpose of the United States Postal Service was codified with the Postal Act of 1792, declaring the post office as a permanent federal institution, and granted Congressional control over postal policy (Campbell, 2008).

Issues arose in the 1970's with postal workers uniting to strike against the federal government, which is considered to be the largest wildcat strike in U.S history (Franklin, 2018). President Nixon chose to deploy the National Guard to deliver mail within New York and declared this event a national emergency (Prescod, 2018). The aftermath of this strike led to the legislation of the Postal Reorganization Act (PRA). This reformed the Post Office into the modern establishment we have now, making it a self-funded, independent agency within the executive branch (Ellis, 2020). One of the most consequential reforms to Postal operations was the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act of 2006 (PAEA). This legislation mandated the United States Postal Service to pre-fund health benefits for retirees seventy-five years in advance (Anderson et al., 2019). This requirement of advanced retirement funding is an obligation that has not been imposed upon any institutions, federal or private sector. An estimated \$5 billion dollars was diverted annually for payment towards these prefunded plans, which manufactured an illusion of insolvency.

Despite the recent surge for postal privatization, it is not a modern movement. The 1970s is when these targeted efforts began, strongly promoted and funded by Charles Koch, one of the founders of the Cato Institute (Graves, 2020). Further advocacy of privatization occurred in the

1980s, through the Reagan Administration's Executive Order No. 12607, the President's Commission on Privatization; with the commission recommending the postal monopoly be ended, as the innovation incentives and cost-efficiency it would bring outweighed any disadvantages (Linowes et al., 1988). Later in 2002, the Postmaster General, appointed by Bush, created the *Postal Service Transformation Plan*; which referenced "privatization" over 160 times and framed privatization of the United States Postal Service as inevitable; but that it was not structurally or financially possible at the time (United States Postal Service, 2002). The reorganization proposal from the Trump Administration, in 2018, called for the privatization of the Postal Service, citing that the transformation of this public institution, into a private corporation, would increase efficiency and cut costs (Executive Office of the President & Office of Management and Budget, 2018). Any discourse relating to privatization, cannot be examined without considering the impacts to equity; as they must be discussed simultaneously in order to properly understand potential effects.

The concept of social equity deems that public services should be distributed in a way that is fair, accessible, and attentive to the existing disparities of the public (Guy & McCandless, 2020). Social equity is a principle that is embedded in the Postal Service through its universal service mandate; ensuring there is equitable delivery to isolated regions, tribal communities, and low-income neighborhoods. Privatization, however, brings in a competing logic, one that reshapes the values of service delivery for operational efficiency, and revenue generation. Privatization of the United States Postal Service could yield immediate financial performance, yet the individuals in less profitable areas, and vulnerable populations would experience increased costs, and service reductions. This effect is visible through healthcare privatization; with studies revealing privatization frequently resulted in intensified inequalities in service

utilization, and patient care (Duggan et al., 2023). The overemphasis of economy and efficiency risks undermining the USPS mandate to provide universal access to mail services, which would only further exacerbate disparities in already underserved communities.

Rural America has as long carried the burden of being systemically underserved compared to urban regions, this pattern of inequitable access and investment is still continuing today. Although there have been federal and state efforts implemented with the intent of improving infrastructure in rural communities, around 27% of rural households still have insufficient access to high-speed internet, residents still lack access to reliable public transit, medical and pharmaceuticals care; and geographic isolation has contributed to a decline in rural retail access (Islam et al., 2022; Paddison & Calderwood, 2007; Rural Health Information Hub, 2025; U.S. Department of Transportation, 2023).

While rural regions encompass 88% of the area served by the United States Postal Service these areas only host 57% of post offices; with around 63% of these offices operating at a loss (U.S. Postal Service Office of Inspector General, 2022). The expansive reach of postal delivery resulted from the nineteenth century proposal Rural Free Delivery (RFD), allowing mail delivery directly to rural locations rather than the previous system which required residents to pick the mail up themselves from distant locations or pay private contractors for delivery (Kernell & McDonald, 1999). Within rural communities, the United States Postal Service is a fundamental institution, not just for delivery of mail, but for the health, social, civic, and economic benefits it brings as well.

Currently, the United States Postal Service functions as an essential economic link for America's rural businesses' and consumers. USPS, unlike other private delivery companies, does

not implement rural delivery surcharges, instead offering uniform and affordable shipping options for all; this is especially beneficial for local and small businesses. (Consulting Group, Inc., 2011) Another vital benefit for rural consumers, who most often face limited retail options locally, is that the United States Postal Service creates straightforward access to digital commerce; free from rural delivery surcharges (Pindus et al., 2010). Apart from keeping delivery and shipping costs uniform and affordable, further economic importance can be seen within the labor market. The United States Postal Service serves as a major employer within the United States and Rural America, employing almost 700,000 individuals, and is considered a primary employer in the fifteen most rural states (Anderson et al., 2020; Office of Inspector General, 2024). The USPS offers reliable, gainful employment with wages that exceed the median of many rural occupations, and allows employees access to healthcare, and retirement benefits. (Anderson, 2023; Economic Policy Institute, 2020).

Beyond the economic metrics, the United States Postal Service provides substantial civic and social benefits in rural contexts. The United States Postal Service's infrastructure ensures the flow of information; through circulation of political publications, government documents, health and wellness information, ballots, and census materials; this is especially important in communities that are isolated and face broadband limitations (Hussaini & Alexander, 2020; Office of Inspector General, 2021; Pindus et al., 2010). One of the most crucial functions of the United States Postal Service is its facilitation of mail-in voting. The Postal Service reduces the logistical barriers that may prevent civic participation; delivering over millions of ballots each year, even to those stationed overseas; ensuring that groups that are marginalized by standard voting methods are able to participate (Morrissey, 2020; Pindus et al., 2010). Beyond their role in elections, the United States Postal Service supplies communities with voter registration

materials, absentee ballots, and passport services; assisting citizens with the application process, and photo services, which is beneficial for communities that are underserved and may lack alternative options (Martin & Titolo, 2020).

Furthermore, rural post offices serve as hubs of community life creating a public area in which news can be exchanged, and residents can gather and interact; this helps reduce the social isolation that is often experienced in rural communities that are facing infrastructure and geographic challenges (Pindus et al., 2010). When considering the vulnerable populations within rural communities, the Postal Service is particularly pivotal; with access to services being constrained through transportation challenges, broadband access, and socioeconomic barriers, the post office is a crucial support for these communities. Mail carriers further serve this social connection through their Carrier Alert program; often acting as informal first responders, checking on residents who have not picked up their mail, reporting accidents and fires, reinforcing community safety (National Association of Letter Carriers, 2025). Beyond the Carrier Alert program, the largest one-day food drive in the nation can be contributed to postal employees, started by the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC); with the donations distributed locally within the communities they serve (Beller, 2024).

The contributions of the United States Postal Service extend ever further, with the significant role the institution plays in public health. During the COVID-19 pandemic Postal Service employees were considered essential, and were responsible for expanding the nation's access to at-home testing materials, and ensuring distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) to frontline workers, emergency responders, community organizations, and healthcare agencies (Hussaini, & Caleb, 2020; Martin & Titolo, 2020; Office of Inspector General, 2021). USPS has consistently served as a key contributor of the Cities Readiness Initiative (CRI) and is

part of the federal Emergency Support Function (ESF) framework, and played an important role in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina (Blunt, 2025).

Recommendations

Upon being reviewed, the current programming of the United States Postal Service indicates that there are substantial operational, structural, and financial challenges that will require a multifaceted approach to achieve solvency. Based on analysis of the public problem and USPS operations, the following reforms highlight key opportunities to preserve universal access and long-term stability:

- Diversification of Funding: Federal Subsidies & Postal Banking
- Organizational Optimization and Modernization
- Implementing SROI as a Performance Metric

The first priority should be to stabilize finances beyond postage revenue; diversification of funding is a key pillar in improving USPS financial resilience. Although they have been authorized, federal rural subsidies have been unused by the Postal Service since 1982, use of these subsidies would ensure that rural post offices that are financially unprofitable remain capable of delivering services (Office of Inspector General, 2025). Further expansion of delivered services would create additional revenue streams; the return of postal banking has the opportunity to increase revenue and expand financial equity in underserved areas (Anson et al., 2013; DiVito, 2022; Purdue Global Law School, 2020). While offering expanded services such as finger printing, and digital identity verification strengthens the role of USPS as a public service provider, by improving accessibility and generating meaningful revenue.

Additionally, optimization and modernization efforts are essential to further strengthen operations. Fleet and infrastructure upgrades are necessary for operational demands, as the current mail-processing, retail and fleet infrastructure are costly, inefficient and limit productivity. Further integration of AI, or other analytic tools could provide operational and project management support; through processing and collecting data, network assessment, demand patterns, and administrative coordination (Hughes et al., 2025). These technological improvements would enable the USPS to more effectively and efficiently allocate delivery routes, personnel, and streamline daily operations. While reforms that reduce duplicative management roles, improve competitive compensation, and enhance on-the-job training can reinforce the agency's operational capacity (Office of Inspector General, 2020a; Rubio, 2021; Werner, 1982).

Finally, the United States Postal Service would benefit from implementing a Social Return on Investment (SROI) analysis, to adequately measure the social value of its services. The SROI would allow USPS to demonstrate the value of their services, since it converts environmental, social, civic and community benefits into traditional monetary metrics, creating a framework capable of evaluating the social and economic returns of the United States Postal Service (Pindus et al., 2010). If implemented correctly, an SROI analysis would equip the United States Postal Service with evidence that can influence future policymaking and publicly communicate its social value.

Conclusion

The challenges faced by the United States Postal Service exemplify the ongoing conflict within public administration; how can we balance efficiency-driven reforms with social equity?

Shifting administrative philosophies brought by New Public Management (NPM) have resulted in prioritizing efficiency and profits over public purpose; often leaving vulnerable and rural communities overlooked. In order to navigate these competing objectives, and sustain this institution's Universal Service Obligation (USO), this report recommends diversifying funding, modernizing and optimizing operations, and incorporating Social Return on Investment (SROI) metrics to measure the broader impact of the agency. The United States Postal Service is a prominent symbol of public service in America; one of the only federal agencies whose presence is visible in communities every day. The path forward requires the United States Postal Service to retain its status as a public institution, providing a public service; privatization cannot fulfill the equitable guarantee of universal access.

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