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What Happens When We Privatize Public Services?

A Look Into the Dangers of USPS Privatization

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Abstract

This paper examines the Trump administration's recent signaling toward the privatization of the United States Postal Service (USPS). Since 2009, USPS has been on the Government Accountability Office's 'high-risk list' due to troubling finances and significantly declining profits. Trump uses this claim to support his argument for privatization; however, this does not contextualize the entire problem, nor does it explore the potential dangers of privatizing public services. Through the use of government documents, news articles, proposals, and academic papers, I will break down the components of this argument for privatization and explore the hypothetical impacts of such a maneuver. After analyzing USPS' historical background, current debates, and projected outcomes, I will conclude with a set of policy recommendations based on these findings.

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Introduction

The United States Postal Service (USPS) is consistently ranked as the most trusted and well-regarded government agency in the country. However, in recent years, it has accumulated billions of dollars in debt, sparking ongoing debate over how to reform the agency, with privatization emerging as one of the most controversial proposals². In particular, recent threats from the Trump Administration to privatize the United States Postal Service (USPS) have brought about alarming concern from unions, postal workers, and policymakers alike, questioning what privatization will mean for American citizens²⁶. For millions of Americans, especially those living in rural areas or marginalized communities, the USPS is more than just a mailbox. It's a lifeline. It's how individuals receive medications, ballots, bills, and important documents like passports or tax returns, and generally stay connected with the American economy²⁵. Unlike private companies, USPS is legally obligated to deliver to every address across the country regardless of geography or profitability making it a vital resource for those in remote or rural areas. A vital resource that is now being threatened.

In March of 2025, the USPS reached an agreement with the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) to cut billions of dollars from its operating budget. The agency then launched a voluntary retirement buyout program aimed at eliminating over 10,000 jobs and internal reports suggest efforts are underway to outsource mail and package handling, long-haul truck routes, and offload leases for "low-performing" post office locations³¹. These actions mark the beginning of Trump's threats toward privatization coming to fruition. As Trump previously

stated in 2020, “The post office is losing billions of dollars... we’re going to make it a profit-making operation”³⁸. More recently, during campaign remarks in early 2025, he reiterated: “It’s time we ran it like a business. No more handouts, no more inefficiency.”

Proponents of the pro-privatization debate argue that privatizing USPS will lead to higher efficiency, profitability, and innovation, claiming the USPS is outdated². Those against privatization, however, raise concerns about the risk to service equity and affordability, especially in low-income and remote regions where private carriers have little to no incentive to operate. Labor advocates warn that privatization would likely result in major job losses, wage cuts, and rising postage rates, undermining worker protections and the affordability of necessary services²⁶. In rural communities where over 57% of the nation’s post offices are located, the cost of losing USPS access means a structural exclusion from economic life²⁶. This paper examines the often overlooked, yet vital, role the USPS plays in American society and the potential dangers of privatizing public services—not only in terms of economic impact but also equity, labor, and democratic access.

Background:

Historical Overview

USPS is the longest-standing American government entity. Dating from 1753 to 1774, Benjamin Franklin oversaw Britain’s colonial mail system and connected the first 13 colonies into an efficient communication network. During the early 1770s, Franklin and other patriots who wanted America to separate from Britain organized underground networks known as the Committees of Correspondence, which enabled patriots to communicate war plans under the British radar⁹. Before the Declaration of Independence was even signed, patriots turned the

Constitutional Post into the Post Office which became the first function of the new government. In 1792, Congress recognized the Post Office's potential as a national communication infrastructure. Lawmakers implemented a progressive pricing policy, charging higher postage rates for business correspondence to subsidize the delivery of inexpensive, uncensored newspapers. This policy greatly expanded political awareness and helped shape America's participatory political culture by making communication accessible and affordable⁹.

In response to consumer complaints about pricing and fear of competition from private couriers with lower prices, Congress passed the Postal Act which began the Postal Services' first monopoly. A set of criminal statutes known as the Private Express Statutes (PES) created the Postal Services monopoly over letter mail in 1845⁶. These statutes gave the postal service sole authority over-delivering letters and packets. According to these statutes, a letter is defined as “a message directed to a specific person or address and recorded in or on a tangible object”, not necessarily any item within an envelope. Since packets are no longer used, letters are the Postal Service's main source of revenue today and are what upholds the Postal Service's postal monopoly⁶. Alongside this act, the Postal Service slashed prices from 20 cents to 5 cents per delivery over 150 miles away. For reference 20 cents would equate to \$6 and 5 cents would equate to \$1.50 today. To make this price decrease possible, Congress converted the Postal Service into a public service that no longer had to break even. This shift recognized the Postal Service as a vital component of America's communication and transportation network, a component that must be preserved and supported to continue the nation's growth.

The second monopoly the Postal Service is known for came much later but was established for similar reasoning—to protect the Postal Service's revenue from private couriers. This second monopoly gave the Postal Service exclusive rights to deliver mail to mailboxes and

was established by Congress in 1934 in what is known as the Mailbox Rule ⁶. The rule states that “Whoever knowingly and willfully deposits any mailable matter such as statements of accounts, circulars, sale bills, or other like matter, on which no postage has been paid, in any letterbox established, approved, or accepted by the Postal Service for the receipt or delivery of mail matter on any mail route with intent to avoid payment of lawful postage thereon, shall for each such offense be fined under this title” ⁶.

During the Civil War, the Postal Service was used to expand Union mail systems by expanding railway mail service, authorizing money orders to begin deliveries in urban areas. During this time, the Postal Service became the first major institution to employ large numbers of women and African Americans. The Postal Service continued to subsidize the nation’s transportation infrastructure by paying railroads to transport mail, a key source of income for rail companies which propelled rail network expansion ⁹.

In 1896, the Postal Service developed the Free Rural Delivery system which connected rural residents to the rest of America. This program was expanded in 1913 and the Parcel Post was created which was designed for delivering heavier and larger items that were too big for standard letter mail deliveries ⁹. For rural America, the Parcel Post served as a vital link to the rest of America, delivering goods and services that were previously difficult to access.

Beyond its responsibilities as a mail courier, the Postal Service extended basic banking access to underserved populations through the Postal Savings System, established in 1911. This government-backed savings program allowed individuals to deposit funds at local post offices and earn interest for all, including marginalized groups during an era of rampant discrimination ⁹. For African Americans and rural Americans, the Postal Savings System provided safe, equitable access to financial tools during an era of widespread exclusion from private banking.

Postal Reorganization Act & Universal Service Pledge

In 1970, the Postal Service received an intense increase in mail volume after the Vietnam War due to technological advancements and returning veterans. However, the rapid increase in mail volume post-war was not matched by a proportional increase in revenue. The result? Deficits and worker dissatisfaction accumulated, leading to one of the largest strikes in American history. In March of 1970, 200,000 underpaid and overworked USPS employees were led by the National Association of Letter Carriers to demand increased salaries and retirement benefits. This strike effectively halted communications across America and as a result, Congress granted postal workers the largest pay raise in postal history and strikers received no penalties for their actions despite the illegality of the strike as federal law prohibited strikes by federal employees at the time²³. Recognizing that the Postal Service could no longer adapt to rising demand through annual congressional appropriations alone, Congress passed the Postal Reorganization Act of 1970. This act converted the Postal Service from a cabinet-level agency to the United States Postal Service (USPS), an independent agency under the executive branch. It adopted a hybrid business model that allowed USPS to become a self-financing entity, funded entirely through its own revenue rather than taxpayer dollars²³. Unlike most federal agencies, USPS no longer relies on direct appropriations to cover operating costs, making a major shift in how other essential government services were structured.

Another key component of the Postal Reorganization Act was its formalization of USPS' Universal Service Obligation. Unlike private companies, this obligation required USPS to deliver mail to all documented mail delivery points across the U.S. for 6 of 7 days out of the week, including the most remote addresses including homes in the Grand Canyon⁶. Although the Postal

Service had been delivering to unprofitable remote and rural areas for decades, the Postal Reorganization Act wrote this responsibility into law, protecting mail service for all Americans.

This aspect of USPS is particularly important to contemporary debate since those in favor of privatization often cite its financial losses as justification for privatizing the agency. However, it's necessary to understand that USPS is already unique among federal agencies in that it does not receive taxpayer funding for its operations. There is a unique tension at play here where the USPS is expected to operate like a business while fulfilling the obligations of public service. Its self-financing model complicates arguments that privatization alone would resolve its financial struggles, raising broader questions about whether essential services should prioritize profitability or public access.

The Postal Accountability & Enhancement Act

In 2006, the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act was passed (PAEA) during the Bush Administration, a law that would fundamentally reshape the financial trajectory of USPS today. What this act did was impose a pre-funding mandate, requiring USPS to set aside \$72 billion to fully cover the cost for 100% of its retiree health benefit liabilities 75 years in advance—approximately \$5.5 billion per year¹. This obligation was not based on actual retiree needs but on projected liabilities for future employees who hadn't even been hired yet.

As a result, USPS has faced extreme financial pressure and has been forced to cut corners, resulting in slowed service, shorter hours of operation, closed processing centers, increased subcontracting, and severely reduced staffing. It has also led to a lag in the postal service's ability to upgrade buildings and infrastructure and purchase new vehicles. What is most

interesting about this act is that it applies to no other federal agency or private corporation, only USPS.

Outlining the Problem

On December 5th, 2024, Senator Rand Paul, the highest-ranking member of the minority party on the Senate’s Homeland Security Committee and member of the Governmental Affairs Committee, publicly outlined the central arguments supporting pro-USPS privatization debates. He first pointed out that USPS has received more than \$120 billion since 2020 as a bailout from Congress³. This money was used for numerous things, including needed renovations, but primarily covered USPS’ debt incurred by its retirement funding mandate. Yes, the Postal Service has continued to report growing financial losses. In 2023, USPS announced a \$6.5 billion loss, and in 2024 a \$9.5 billion loss—nearly a 40% increase from the previous year. He attributed these shortfalls to what he described as an inefficient and bloated labor structure and called into question the agency’s recent decisions¹². His criticism is further substantiated by USPS’ \$4 billion budget increase, raising 2024’s total operating costs to \$89.5 billion in spite of such losses. In his opening remarks, Paul states, “The Postal Service has tried to explain away these bad numbers due to costs that [the USPS] cannot control.” These costs include \$9.6 billion in electric delivery vehicles, \$4 billion per year for the next 10 years to convert and build facilities into hubs that “so far have resulted in worse delivery times and service,” and has asked to raise its \$15 billion borrowing limit¹². And yes, these numbers are in the multi-billions—capital B-illions. Even with ongoing shortfalls, USPS has converted 190,000 employees to permanent, unionized positions with significant pension and healthcare obligations that have only contributed to growing debt. Paul closes us off by pointing out that private

businesses that face uncontrolled costs due to a declining business model would not increase their expensive workforce but instead handle these costs by adjusting and making cuts where necessary. Essentially, Paul’s point is that the Postal Service is making extremely irresponsible decisions, and when you consider the nation's “dismal financial condition,” due to its \$36 trillion debt, it seems more than irresponsible—but incredibly reckless¹². While Senator Paul is no stranger to controversy, his remarks reflect real concerns about USPS’s fiscal instability. However, these issues require deeper explanation and historical context to determine whether privatization would actually resolve them, or worsen them. To do so, this paper will examine the roots of USPS’s challenges in two categories: flawed legislative decisions and administrative mismanagement.

Legislative Decisions

USPS White House Task Force Findings:

In 2018, Trump signed an executive order stating that USPS has seen a cumulative decline since the recession and is incapable of making payments required by law for its retiree health benefit obligations, which totaled more than \$38 billion at the end of fiscal year 2017, and since 2009 has been on the Government Accountability Office’s (GAO) high-risk list—a list updated at the start of each new Congress which details “programs and operations with serious vulnerabilities to waste, fraud, abuse, or mismanagement, or in need of transformation,” according to the GAO website³⁴.

In this executive order, Trump established a White House USPS task force that evaluated five main areas: the expansion and pricing of the package delivery market, implications of

declining mail volume, the definition of universal service obligation in light of emerging technology, USPS's role in rural areas, and the state of the USPS business model.

So what did the Task Force conclude? While it affirmed that USPS is on an unsustainable path, the Task Force did not recommend a complete structural overhaul. In fact, it acknowledges that USPS has already undergone significant restructuring. USPS has already gone through a significant restructuring over the past decade to a fault. It closed or consolidated 485 of its 685 mail processing facilities, increased the number of deliveries on routes multiple times, and eliminated more than 200,000 job positions since its peak in 2006¹⁶. It also reduced hours of operations at 13,000 primarily rural post offices, which left 1,800 offices open only for two hours a day. Imagine trying to get a package during the Christmas rush with only a two-hour time window.

The Task Force identified the primary cause of the Postal Service's financial crisis as the PAEA in 2006. According to the report the policy accounted for 92% of the \$67 billion in losses since 2007 and 100% of losses since the economy recovered from the Great Recession in 2018. They effectively exhausted the Postal Service credit limit and starved the agency of needed investment. In addition to this, the PAEA also holds power over a large portion of the Postal Service's pricing.

The PAEA separated USPS products and services into two formal categories—market dominant and competitive. In layman's terms, a market-dominant product is when one or few companies control a large portion of the market, like a monopoly, whereas competitive products are anything USPS competes with private markets for consumers³⁶. What the PAEA did was put an overly stringent price cap on postage increases that are tied to the Consumer Price Index, a measure of inflation³⁵.

To be fair, there are benefits to this pricing policy. It prevents excessive rate hikes, maintaining affordable services for small businesses, nonprofits, and low-income communities. It also provides predictability, allowing bulk mailers and commercial users to budget years in advance. However, this comes at a cost. Strict regulation combined with the retirement pre-funding mandate has handcuffed USPS's ability to respond to financial emergencies, despite being expected to operate without taxpayer subsidies³⁵. This contradiction lies at the heart of the privatization debate where many argue that "USPS is inefficient and losing money, but a private business wouldn't have these issues!" That may be true, but only because private companies are not subject to the same legal constraints, universal service obligations, or federal mandates. So can we truly argue that privatization is the best solution to fix these issues?

A recent example of this issue was during the Great Recession when USPS lost a significant amount of money due to a permanent 20% drop in the volume of letter mail. To help USPS recover, the Postal Regulatory Commission allowed a temporary emergency rate hike of 4.3% for market-dominant products in 2014 but then repealed this increase in 2016. Before the repeal, USPS had returned to making a slight profit, despite their continuing retirement payments in accordance with the PAEA. However, they quickly returned to seeing financial losses, as the loss in mail volume was permanent, not temporary. Without Congressional funds or the ability to determine their prices to maintain the agency's operating costs independent of tax dollars, the financial losses continued to increase, accumulating to a \$4 billion loss since the repeal³⁵. Even with the \$120 billion Congressional bailout from 2020 to 2022, it is simply not enough funds to make up for decades of incurred losses and renovate structures that have not been modernized in years³.

Executive In-Action

In 2010, the Postal Service's Civil Service Retirement System (CSRS) account review recommended that the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) adopt an updated pension valuation method. They recommended that this updated method aligned with private sector accounting standards, rather than continuing with the outdated method established in 1974. This recommendation aimed to address the growing pre-funding crisis created by the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA). At the time, the Obama administration was asked to implement these recommendations through executive action. His administration refused, instead deferring the matter to Congress which ultimately failed to act³⁵. Had OPM adopted the updated accounting approach, the CSRS account would have revealed a \$50–55 billion surplus, which under current law would automatically be transferred to the Postal Service Retiree Health Benefits Fund (PSRHBF). This transfer would have significantly reduced if not entirely eliminated, USPS's unfunded retiree health liabilities, easing one of the central financial burdens driving USPS's deficits³⁵.

Modern Mismanagement

Louis DeJoy was appointed by Donald Trump to lead the Postal Service during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Before his appointment, DeJoy built a company known as New Breed Logistics, a national logistics and supply chain service provider that worked alongside many big-name contractors including Boeing, Verizon, and the Postal Service.

In 2014, DeJoy sold his company for \$615 million to XPO Logistics and instead founded a real estate investment and consulting company. However, DeJoy still has many business connections to the Postal Service⁴². To this day, DeJoy has between \$30.1 and \$75.3 million in

investments in companies that are either in business with or compete with the Postal Service, but most of these investments are in XPO Logistics.

In addition to his business dealings, DeJoy developed deep political connections, which many believe played a role in his appointment. DeJoy had been a major financial supporter of the Republican Party for many years and was even a deputy national fundraising chairman for the party, hosting events and fundraisers for Republican presidential candidates since 2006. As of 2016, DeJoy personally donated \$1.2 million to Trump and an additional \$1.3 million to the Republican Party ⁴². However, political connections do not equate to political experience, which has subsequently led to a series of controversies surrounding DeJoy and his management of USPS.

A List of Controversies:

One of the earliest concerns about DeJoy's qualifications resurfaced from an audit conducted in 2001 by the USPS Inspector General. For context, an audit is simply a form of government evaluation for public sector entities. The audit found that New Breed Logistics had been awarded over \$300 million in USPS contracts beginning in 1992 ²⁶. The issue was that these contracts were not "competitively bid," meaning they were awarded without allowing other vendors to bid, which could have lowered the costs. While the audit

The audit did not claim that the company broke any contract terms, though it did violate USPS guidelines and raised many concerns about the process used to award these contracts. This questionable loophole caused USPS to overpay the company up to \$53 million, posing costs and performance risks for USPS from the loss. Though old, this revelation led those who were

already skeptical of DeJoy to further question his qualifications. And those who didn't question him certainly would question him soon.

Shortly after DeJoy assumed office, USPS was granted over \$120 billion in federal funding between 2020 to 2022, the most congressional funds it has seen since becoming an independent agency ³. So, where did all this money go? Well, \$107 billion went towards paying off past-due and future obligations for retiree health care benefits. This amount, lawmakers hoped, would enable the agency to invest in long-overdue maintenance and implement mail delivery improvements. \$10 billion funded the 2020 CARES Act, short for the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, which is how Americans received their stimulus checks in the mail. Finally, \$3 billion was used in 2022 to purchase electric delivery trucks and charging stations ³. Most people would assume that with debts paid, COVID relief covered, and additional funds to purchase new equipment, USPS's finances would finally see a positive trend. Unfortunately, under DeJoy's crude mismanagement of the agency, this was not the case.

As previously mentioned, USPS lost \$6.5 billion in the fiscal year 2023 and \$9.5 billion in 2024. In a recent federal audit, DeJoy was criticized for blowing past the opportunity to save \$22 million if it had maintained its fleet of vehicles effectively ¹³. Other concerns have also been raised about DeJoy's conduct and compensation. In one fiscal year, he earned more than President Biden, despite USPS operating at a multibillion-dollar loss. Additionally, under his leadership, USPS reportedly allocated funds to increase executive compensation for himself and other top managers, even as the agency was laying off workers, reducing post office hours, and requesting to raise its borrowing limit, all while reporting the \$6.5 billion loss in 2023.

During an oversight hearing, also in 2024, Representative Rich McCormick criticized DeJoy's inability to oversee the management of USPS and to mitigate its losses, saying, "You

were graded by the United States people... you bankrupt [USPS] through your reputation only, through your reputation, you are responsible for the loss of the postal office... with all the AI and all the computer systems you're worse than if I took a horse and picked up the mail and delivered it two miles down the road." After McCormick's last remark, DeJoy shared a rather interesting response—the man covered his ears. Literally. He cupped his hands and covered his ears in response to McCormick's criticism ⁷. Albeit harshly said, it was not a response the American public was hoping for. This moment resonated with many Americans who have watched USPS services deteriorate under DeJoy's tenure. One online commenter wrote, "This guy has been tearing down the US post office since he started. He has removed equipment, and mailboxes, hiring temp workers who have no skin in the game instead of permanent workers. He's trying to destroy it so it can be privatized. He's a disgrace" (justvisiting4122). Another reflected on the importance of institutional knowledge, stating, "My wife is a retired postal worker of 25 years & feels the reason that Postmaster Generals fail so often, is that practically 'none' of them have previously worked for the US Postal Service! The Govt. should promote from within, if they want to succeed" (rogendron8705).

What will privatization look like?

Privatizing USPS could significantly alter how mail services function, potentially worsening existing challenges such as rising postage costs, slower delivery times, and the inability to renovate or maintain aging postal infrastructure—rather than alleviating them. To estimate the potential impacts of privatization and the specific avenues USPS may take, this paper will examine comparative evidence from other countries that have privatized their national postal systems. The United Kingdom's Royal Mail will serve as the primary case study, as it

most closely mirrors USPS in both structure and service obligations. Like USPS, Royal Mail was a publicly operated, nationwide carrier with a universal service mandate and strong union representation prior to privatization. While privatization initially promised increased efficiency and profitability, the Royal Mail case shows that these gains were short-lived. Over time, privatization led to higher prices, reduced service accessibility, and lower delivery reliability, disproportionately impacting rural areas and vulnerable populations—similar groups who rely heavily on USPS in the United States.

Job Loss

One major concern when considering the potential dangers of privatizing USPS is the impact on its workforce and vast postal network. USPS is one of America's largest employers, with nearly 640,000 career and non-career employees who deliver 376 million pieces of mail every day. Of these 640,000 employees, 73,000 are veterans⁴ and 185,000 are African American²¹. Both groups have historically been employed by the USPS, providing these individuals with a path to the middle class which was especially significant during times of extreme segregation and discrimination.

Unions and other observers believe that transforming USPS into a private, profit-driven entity would likely result in massive job loss, although the exact number is unclear. In addition to layoffs, privatization puts wages and benefits at risk according to the American Postal Workers Union³⁹. To provide further context, private courier companies such as FedEx and UPS operate between 100,000⁸ to 130,000³⁷ fewer employees and different labor models for similar volumes of business. If USPS were to follow similar business models, then it is possible that their workforce would reflect similar numbers which is a significant downsizing. For proponents of

the pro-privatization debate, this is beneficial as it gives the company autonomy over its own business decisions and saves money on labor costs. While it's true that reducing employees saves money in the short term, this may have long-term trade-offs like slower service and worker dissatisfaction.

This concern is reflected in the case of London Royal Mail, which employed approximately 159,000 people in 2011 according to their 2011-12 annual report ²⁸. In 2025 there are now around 130,000 employees across the UK—indicating a 29,000 employee reduction or an 18% workforce reduction ²⁹. This downsizing has not only displaced workers but also raised concerns about transparency. One article states that a recent statement made by the Royal Mail referencing surplus and displaced employees makes no reference to job losses but repeatedly mentions the Managing the Surplus Framework ²⁷. This framework is a tool used by Royal Mail in order to downsize their workforce under ‘voluntary redundancy’. In simpler terms, this means that employers will offer an employee a financial incentive to ‘voluntarily’ leave their position, which is an alternative to directly laying off employees ²⁷. While voluntary redundancy is much more humane than being fired with nothing to take home, many individuals may feel pressured to take the offer out of fear of being forced out instead. Many of these employees have families at home, and dependents that rely on this income, and if taken away leads to worker displacement.

If privatized, USPS may employ similar tactics to downsize without being entirely transparent with the public about these operations, in fact, it has already been considered. Right before USPS Postmaster General DeJoy resigned, he announced a promise to cut 10,000 jobs within a month through a Voluntary Early Retirement program despite his cuts already resulting in understaffing and slower delivery times. However, since he resigned days after this statement

it is uncertain whether this promise will come to fruition. Hopefully for the sake of families dependent upon USPS ¹⁴.

Slow Costly Services for Rural Americans

Rural America stands to lose the most from USPS privatization. While only 16% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, these areas sum up to 88% of the geographic territory USPS serves and house 57% of all post offices ²². Currently, USPS is bound by law to uphold its Universal Service Obligation and serve 148 million addresses across America, ensuring that remote areas receive mail at the same price and frequency as more profitable, populated areas ⁶. Under a privatized model, there are two options pertaining to USPS' Universal Service Obligation. The first option requires subsidizing the obligation through tax dollars. The second option is to cut off 'unprofitable' services—in other words, cutting essential mail services to remote, unprofitable locations.

Unlike other sectors that have been privatized, such as airlines or railways, postal systems pose a unique challenge due to their role in national infrastructure and affordability. One economic study shows that the optimal privatization level is inversely related to the cost of public funds used to finance Universal Service Obligations. The paper concludes that full privatization only makes sense if the cost of public funds—i.e., taxpayer money—is relatively low, meaning the government can easily afford to subsidize the Universal Service Obligation. Otherwise, the alternative is to raise postage prices to reduce the need for public funding. In America's case, this would increase competition amongst USPS and other private couriers as private firms would be offering better, more competitive prices ²⁴. These firms would also naturally target more profitable markets like highly condensed urban areas and leave USPS with

unprofitable areas that would only cause USPS losses to grow exponentially, prompting further price hiking or labor reduction to make up for lost profits. Thus, it would make the most sense to only partially privatize USPS and subsidize the Universal Service Obligation through taxpayer funding; however, many pro-privatization arguments in America are largely against partial privatizing and believe that taxpayers should not have to fund USPS as they haven't done so since the 70's.

Private companies like UPS and FedEx already charge surcharges for delivering to 62% of ZIP codes, affecting more than 102 million people ²². These fees apply not only to rural locations but to areas just 6–12 miles outside major cities like Phoenix or Nashville. In contrast, USPS adds zero surcharges due to its public pricing mandate. A fully privatized USPS could remove these price protections, causing shipping costs to skyrocket for rural residents. In the worst case, albeit unlikely, a privatized USPS could simply eliminate service to sparsely populated regions that are extremely unprofitable, effectively forcing residents to drive hours to their nearest drop-off location for mail ¹⁰.

The claim that privatization leads to higher costs for consumers is corroborated by comparative evidence as well. In Europe, countries that privatized their postal systems saw steeper price increases between 2012 and 2021 than countries that kept their services public ²². The London Royal Mail specifically, increased the cost of first and second-class stamps six times within the span of three years. Its most recent increase raises the cost of first-class stamps by 3% and the cost of second-class stamps by 2.4% ⁴⁰. These changes are certainly more than a simple inconvenience. Such increases disproportionately affect low-income and rural residents who rely on postal services to deliver critical documents like passports and tax forms at affordable rates.

Privatization may also reduce delivery speed and service reliability. After the Royal Mail's privatization, service performance dropped significantly. Similar to USPS, the Royal Mail is obligated to deliver letters six days a week, although in recent years it has failed to meet its delivery speed targets. In 2023, the Royal Mail delivered only 74.7% of its First-Class mail on time against its target of achieving 93% timeliness⁴⁰. Consumers have also noticed a decline in the reliability of the Royal Mail with late deliveries and missing mail being common complaints. Other countries with privatized models have reported similar issues as a result of extreme cost-cutting mechanisms. For example, Italy's privatized postal service delivers to certain rural areas on alternate days for a total of three times per week instead of daily as it used to²². In Denmark, the privatized postal service announced that it would end letter delivery entirely, effectively surrendering that aspect of universal service to citizens²². All of these examples highlight that profit-driven models often think of a short-term profit-maximizing mindset, prioritizing cost savings over service coverage.

Essential Goods

Privatization poses serious risks to Americans in remote and underserved regions, where USPS often serves as the only accessible link to essential goods and services. Across America, it is estimated that 20% of all Americans over 40 who are prescribed medication for a chronic condition receive their prescription exclusively through the postal service. Among veterans, who make up over 25% of rural communities, 84% receive their prescriptions through the mail²².

During the COVID-19 pandemic, USPS played a vital role in delivering medications, food, and emergency supplies to households that were otherwise cut off due to travel restrictions.

Even now, entire communities rely on the Postal Service year-round for groceries, prescriptions, and other essential goods.

Beyond healthcare, USPS delivers Social Security checks, legal documents, and goods from small local businesses, especially in areas where private services are sparse or unaffordable. To remove or reduce Universal Service Obligations and pricing would be detrimental, and potentially life-threatening to those who rely on USPS to deliver essential goods⁵. In Alaska for example, USPS partners with the Alaska Bypass Mail, which ships groceries and supplies to remote Alaskan communities at subsidized rates²². A private courier would have little incentive to continue such a program without taxpayer subsidy. Without affordable delivery options, remote Alaskans would be left vulnerable to food insecurity, many of which are Indigenous and already economically disadvantaged.

Financial Success

One of the most common arguments in favor of USPS privatization is the potential for financial success and profitability. A frequently cited example is Germany's postal service, Deutsche Post, which successfully transitioned into a highly profitable, global logistics company generating over \$110 billion in revenue. Germany accomplished this transformation gradually, privatizing in phases between 1995 and 2000. This allowed the government to retain control during early reform years and slowly sell off public shares. Crucially, Deutsche Post also diversified beyond traditional mail, expanding heavily into supply chain services, warehousing, and express global delivery. Today, less than 5% of the Deutsche Post's revenue comes from domestic mail whereas approximately 52% of USPS revenue came from domestic mail in 2024¹⁵.

For USPS to follow a similar path, it would need to adopt a phased approach to privatization and aggressively diversify its revenue streams. In one interview, John Althen, the USPS Office of Inspector General notes that financially successful privatized postal systems share two common traits: diversified revenue streams and flexibility in business operations ³². However, one significant barrier for USPS is its extensive Universal Service Obligation (USO) For privatization to work without sacrificing accessibility, the federal government would need to fund unprofitable routes or create a sustainable subsidy system. Germany, for example, maintained its USO by continuing to deliver across the country a minimum of 5 days per week, even after privatization ¹¹. That said, privatizing Germany’s post office still came at the cost of cutting employees and lowering wages. No matter how successful privatization is, some trade offs will be inevitable when privatizing a public service which is certainly something worth considering.

Unfortunately, this balance between profitability and public service does not appear to be the priority nor the trajectory of the agency under the Trump Administration's vision for USPS. Trump has repeatedly framed USPS as a “money-losing operation”, claiming he will transform it into a profit-making agency ³⁸. Despite these claims, not a single interview or task force report proposes a funding mechanism for the Universal Service Obligation. There also appear to be no concrete plans in place for diversifying revenue streams for USPS either. Combined, these claims, and lack thereof, suggest that unprofitable mandates like the Universal Service Obligation may not be preserved.

Other international examples illustrate the risks of such an approach. In the United Kingdom, Royal Mail initially posted profits following privatization but later faced declining letter volumes and growing costs. In 2022, the Royal Mail reported a \$1 billion loss and this loss

is after downscaling labor by 10,000 employees that same year and raising prices on products ³³. And they are not the only privatized postal service to be struggling financially. PostNL in the Netherlands stated that its current business model is “no longer sustainable” due to falling mail demand and rising costs of operation ²². What do the PostNL and London Royal Mail have in common? To start, neither of their governments funds the postal services through Universal Service Obligation as both agencies are fully privatized. Second, neither postal service is nearly as diverse as Germany in terms of revenue with both having at least half their revenue coming from domestic products where demand is on a constant decline. These two examples should serve as cautionary tales. While postal privatization has the potential to improve financial performance, it requires careful, gradual implementation, along with public investment in universal service and a clear strategy for diversification and modernization. Absent these conditions, especially under a model that entirely prioritized profitability over its public mission, may lead to worsened service, labor instability, and financial underperformance rather than long-term sustainability.

Public Safety

During emergencies and natural disasters, the United States Postal Service plays a critical role in national response efforts. USPS is part of the federal government’s Emergency Support Function (ESF) framework—a coordinated system of public and private entities that provide essential services, resources, and information to help save lives, protect property, and restore community infrastructure. According to the Administration for Strategic Preparedness & Response, USPS contributes to multiple ESF categories ⁶.

1. Under ESF-1, USPS is responsible for reporting infrastructure disruption and damages to ensure building integrity and individual safety.
2. Under ESF-6, USPS must provide mail services to relocated populations which it did in response to Hurricane Katrina where thousands were displaced.
3. Under ESF-8, USPS must assist in distributing and transporting medicine and medical information to members of the general public affected by major disasters.

Beyond disaster relief, USPS contributes to public safety and crime prevention through education campaigns and outreach initiatives. The Postal Service frequently warns communities about criminal activity involving mail. In 2008, for example, USPS sent out 100,000 postcards in Maine, warning people about soda bottles filled with chemicals to create a “bottle bomb” that had been left in mailboxes across the state. USPS also co-chairs the Postal and Shipping Sector led by the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) ⁶. On top of these responsibilities, USPS also has its law enforcement branch.

The United States Postal Investigative Service (USPIS) is one of the oldest federal law enforcement agencies, existing before Congress was granted its basic law-making powers. USPIS enforces over 200 federal laws including protecting employees from workplace violence cracking down on drug trafficking and exposing worker's compensation fraud. The USPIS currently employs over 1,600 postal inspectors who are trained to detect explosives and other dangerous materials in packages, 700+ postal officers, and nearly 600 technical administrative support staff. After 9/11, Postal Inspectors became full-time liaisons for terrorism task forces, working alongside the FBI to ensure national safety. If USPS were privatized, it is possible these agencies would remain intact, but similar to the Universal Service Obligation, a funded agency.

If USPS were privatized, many of these services could technically remain. However, like the Universal Service Obligation, they would likely require continued public funding and oversight. Without that support, the infrastructure currently used to maintain public safety, crisis response, and law enforcement coordination through USPS could be weakened or deprioritized in a profit-driven model.

Internet & Billing

As of 2023, over 14% of rural households lack access to broadband internet, suggesting that rural Americans are more likely to pay their bills through mail compared to their urban counterparts. Overall, 14% of utility bills and 27% of taxes and fees were paid with checks as of 2022 and mailed through USPS rather than online submissions. If privatization added surcharges to remote deliveries, it would require rural residents to spend additional income on installing internet they may not have considering 15% of rural America lives below the poverty line or pay additional money to mail utility and tax documents that they are required to pay³⁰. Not to mention, if services in rural areas are slowed due to any sort of reduction in Universal Service obligations as a result of privatization, residents may be charged additional late fees by their utility providers.

Threat to Democracy

Today, a ballot can be mailed from almost anywhere in the country and it will reach a county clerk to be counted as a vote. During the 2024 general election alone, USPS delivered more than 99 million ballots to or from voters. Rural voters in particular rely heavily on the mail-in voting option since physical polling sites are often miles and miles away from their

homes, with over half of rural county polling sites serving areas more than 62 miles wide compared to 2 miles for urban sites ²². The ability to vote by mail is especially important for older rural residents, where residents 65 and up made up 20% of those who voted by mail in rural areas compared to 16% in urban areas ⁵. Under full privatization, if Universal Standard Services are dropped or reduced, rural areas will see slower mail service which in turn threatens individuals' ability to vote. In many states, the mail-in voting window has a very tight timeline, some of which require an individual's ballot to be received by a designated polling site a week or more before the election.

Impact on Private Couriers

The threat to Universal Service is not only detrimental to consumers but private couriers as well. Many private couriers rely on what is known as the "Last Mile Delivery" USPS provides to deliver mail to remote areas that are unprofitable. Last-mile delivery costs can contribute up to 41% of supply chain operating costs and account for 53% of shipping costs. The last-mile delivery market is known for its inefficiencies but it is necessary to keep rural and remote residents connected to the rest of America. It is estimated that this last mile market costs \$30.2 billion as of 2018 and only continues to grow with the demand for fast, efficient deliveries ¹⁷. If USPS were to reduce its Universal Service Obligation under a privatized model, even partially, it would cut off Americans in remote or rural areas from the majority of mail couriers altogether, without them having to personally cover additional shipping costs—if it is even an option provided by other companies, as shown in figure 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Private Companies vs. USPS Price Comparison

2025 Delivery Area Surcharges			
ZIP Code Categorization	UPS	FedEx	USPS
Non-contiguous US			
Alaska	\$43.25	\$43.00	\$0.00
Hawaii	\$15.35	\$14.50	\$0.00
Remote area surcharges in the contiguous US			
Commercial and residential	\$15.35	\$15.50	\$0.00
Extended area surcharges in the contiguous US			
Commercial Delivery	\$5.35	\$5.25	\$0.00
Residential Delivery	\$8.30	\$8.30	\$0.00
Delivery area surcharges in contiguous US			
Commercial Delivery	\$4.20	\$4.20	\$0.00
Residential Delivery	\$6.15	\$6.20	\$0.00

Source: Institute for Policy Studies Policy Brief: “Who Would Pay the Biggest Price for Postal Privatization”. Figure shows prices for various types of areas across the United States comparing UPS and FedEx (private services) and USPS (public service).

Policy Recommendations

Repealing or reforming the Postal Accountability and Enhancement Act (PAEA) would remove the artificial deficit created by the pre-funding mandate. With this money saved, USPS can redirect funds toward operational upgrades, delivery efficiency, and workforce modernization. Reform may also include updating pension valuation methods to reflect private-sector accounting standards which would further reduce liabilities and create a better financial picture.

Another recommendation is to reinforce public service leadership and restore partial public funding. The Postal Service’s leadership should be selected not solely for cost-cutting credentials but for a demonstrated understanding of USPS’s public service mission, including its role in delivering essential goods, supporting civic participation (like vote-by-mail), and maintaining access in remote areas. Additionally, reintroducing partial public funding, especially for unprofitable but necessary services, would help stabilize operations without turning USPS

into a fully subsidized entity. For instance, Congress could establish annual appropriations for maintaining service in high-cost regions, similar to funding models used in transportation and public broadcasting. This would support accountability and transparency while ensuring USPS can meet its Universal Service Obligation (USO) without resorting to service cuts or layoffs.

Finally, it's important to recognize that the USPS was never primarily designed as a profit-driven entity; its fundamental role is rooted in public service and ensuring universal accessibility. Economic arguments for privatization frequently overlook critical social responsibilities fulfilled by USPS, including its monopoly over mailboxes and first-class mail delivery, which are integral to public safety and reliability. As such, USPS could also strategically refocus operations based on market efficiency. Rather than blanket privatization, USPS could scale back operations in areas where private carriers like FedEx and UPS already offer affordable, reliable service, allowing the Postal Service to reallocate resources to communities that private markets fail to serve. For example, USPS could partner with private carriers in urban and high-density markets while maintaining direct control over rural, tribal, and low-income delivery routes. This hybrid model would enable USPS to reduce redundancy, improve cost-efficiency, and strengthen service equity by focusing on areas where its public presence remains essential. Moreover, selective scaling does not eliminate USPS's broader infrastructure—it preserves the framework needed for emergencies, elections, and disaster response, where private carriers often underperform or disengage.

Conclusion

Privatization of the United States Postal Service is a complex and high-stakes proposition. While advocates argue it could improve efficiency and profitability, this paper has shown that such

outcomes are far from guaranteed, especially without a clear strategy for preserving universal service, protecting workers, and ensuring affordability for all Americans. USPS plays a far greater role than simply delivering mail; it serves as an essential infrastructure for rural communities, veterans, small businesses, and those reliant on critical government services. International examples demonstrate that successful privatization requires phased implementation, strong regulatory oversight, public subsidies for unprofitable routes, and significant investment in diversification. Without these safeguards, privatization could result in widespread job loss, diminished service, higher costs, and the erosion of a trusted public institution. Any future reform must prioritize the public good over profit and recognize that USPS's value lies in its mission to serve every American, not just the most profitable ones.

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