

PMG addresses Secretaries of State convention

Remarks of PMG Jack Potter to the National Association of Secretaries of State, Portland OR, July 17, 2007

Thank you, Bill (Bradbury), for that kind introduction. I'm very happy to be here with you today for your summer meeting.

And to make it even better, how can I not feel good about a conference called "A First-Class Experience?"

That's what we work to provide you at the Postal Service. And based on what I've seen so far, that's what you're providing here in Portland this week. So it looks like we've all come to the right place.

I don't know how it looks to you, but it seems to me that this national election cycle is one of busiest and most intense I've ever seen. More candidates than ever - from both parties. More money raised earlier than ever. More debates. More opinion pieces. More spin and counter spin on the Sunday morning talk shows. And more babies kissed . . . in more early primary and caucus states than ever before.

It doesn't seem like anybody's sitting this one out. Everybody wants to be a part of it. And just about everybody in this room today will be. Each of us has an important role in supporting the most important exercise in democracy experienced by Americans.

And with the level of interest we're seeing now, there's a lot of hope that actual voter turnout may be higher than usual. We've got a big job to get ready for it before next November - that's less than 16 months away.

And if we've learned anything over the few election cycles, it's the way an election is conducted can be just as important as how an election turns out. So I know we'll all be doing our level best to make sure every voter experiences a smooth, well-organized process - one that provides them with the highest levels of trust and confidence when they cast their ballots.

And speaking personally, I consider our elections - whether they're taking place in a single village, an entire county, or in all 50 states and the District of Columbia - one of our most important civic exercises, one that defines what is to be an American.

From the perspective of the Postal Service, we're extremely proud to participate in the process. Because the most basic activity in our innovative process of self government - one that has been a model for so many other nations, and one that also serves to "bind the nation together" - is the selection of our leaders through

the ballot box. And we at the United States Postal Service are pleased to support this in so many different ways.

But let me clarify one thing: we do a lot of things to support the election process, but we don't do politics. That's for the parties, their candidates, and their supporters - not for the Postal Service. We play no favorites. We take no positions.

But the Postal Service will have a role at every step of the way. It starts with registration. And the mail makes voter registration more convenient than ever. You don't have to look for parking down at the court house. You don't have to worry about rushing from work to the Board of Elections office before it closes. Fill out the form, drop it in the mail and you're done.

From there, it moves on to helping the candidates be heard as they work to explain their positions to potential voters. And few things can do this as well as the mail. Whether a candidate is trying to reach supporters, influence fence sitters, change the minds of people in the other camp, or simply get out the vote, there's nothing like the mail.

I know how much effort campaign staffs put into researching the issues that can define a candidate and an election. Well, we put that much and more into researching the mail. And we've learned a few things.

Mail gets attention like no other medium. People open it. They look at it. They remember it. They act on it. And here's something worth remembering - after they've given it a first read, they often put it aside and give it another look when they're ready to make a decision. Where else are you going to get value like that?

And only the mail can let you choose to focus on one voter at a time, one precinct at a time, an entire ward, an entire congressional district, an entire city, or an entire state. That makes it incredibly cost effective.

I remember when I was a kid in the Bronx, a New Jersey candidate had to run commercials on New York television because there weren't any TV stations on the New Jersey side of the Hudson River. That must have been a very expensive way to run for office.

With mail, you don't have to pay to blanket an entire area just to reach a limited group of voters. You can limit your reach to exactly who you want - and not one person more. That's just another example of the unique value of the mail.

And from your point of view, as Secretaries of State with the responsibility for running an election, and with the accountability that comes with it, that's where the rubber meets the road. That's the acid test.

It's good to know that mail does all those other things so well, but when it comes right down to it, those ballots better show up where they're supposed to show up. They better show up on time. And they better show up in good shape so there's no question about it being a secret ballot.

But, as I said, the Postal Service has a lot of experience with this. We've created processes that address all of these issues. And, even though replacing "in-person" elections with "by-mail" elections is still the exception rather than the rule, the Postal Service has been handling mailed absentee and military ballots for generations of American voters. I might add that we've been doing a very good job at it, too.

It's not my role to tell you how you should be conducting elections - that's a decision that will be made in your states, by your states. But if your state does choose to conduct elections by mail - like they're do right here in Oregon - I want you to know that the Postal Service is ready to partner with you.

It all starts with trust and security. The Postal Service has had a reputation for protecting what we call "the sanctity of the mail" and "the security of the seal" for more than 200 years. Our employees recognize that trust placed in them by the people we serve and they work hard to maintain that trust.

In the Postal Service, we talk about "bleeding Postal blue." In its simplest terms, that means we consider ourselves part of something that's much greater than each of us as individuals. We are part of a proud heritage, a chain of history, with traditions that we consider it our duty - our proud duty - to uphold, and to pass on to the next generation. And the most important of those traditions is trust.

The mail also has an extra level of security. Protecting the mail from criminal misuse is one of the oldest and most respected federal law enforcement agencies - the Postal Inspection Service. Since the late eighteenth century, the brave men and women of the Inspection Service have put criminals on notice that crime - particularly crime involving the mail - just doesn't pay.

You may not hear a lot about them - they're known as the "silent service" because they keep a low profile. But they're at the forefront of modern law-enforcement technology and in the thick of good old shoe-leather investigations. They get the evidence and get the convictions. And they've been so effective at it that the bad guys - at least the smarter ones - know it's a losing bet to take on the mail.

But you don't have to take my word for it. The respected Ponemon Institute, one of the nation's foremost experts on privacy policies, privacy practices, and protection, has rated the Postal Service extremely high in this area.

This year, for the third time in a row, the Ponemon Institute named the Postal Service the most trusted government agency and among the ten most trusted of all organizations. As the unit of the federal government which touches the largest numbers of Americans every day, and the one to which the largest numbers of Americans entrust sensitive personal and business information, this means a great deal to us. I can promise you that we will do everything we can to maintain this trust.

The Postal Service's track record in voting by mail also includes working through one of the most difficult election challenges faced by any state at any time. I'm talking about Louisiana in 2006.

Think back for a moment to August 29, 2005. You saw the same news reports that I did, showing Hurricane Katrina pound through New Orleans, devastating the city and many of its surrounding parishes. Then, less than a month later, Hurricane Rita slammed into the Texas-Louisiana border, bringing incredible destruction to southeastern Louisiana.

The Postal Service worked hard to keep mail service up and running in the affected areas. But we also had to look ahead. The following spring, New Orleans would be electing its city government and parishes throughout the entire state would be holding elections. With so many people displaced from their homes and living in shelters and temporary housing - in every corner of the nation - it was clear that absentee ballots would be the key to successful elections.

We worked closely with the Louisiana Secretary of State's Election Division to develop the processes that would help get the job done. One of the first things we did was hang posters in every Post Office in America letting people know how they could obtain absentee ballots and when they should be mailed.

We met regularly with the Louisiana Secretary of State and his staff to support them in every aspect of the absentee ballots - from getting them to voters to their return by voting deadlines. The Postal Inspection Service was involved in all mail security issues at every step of the process.

We also contacted every candidate to explain mailing options, stress deadlines, and let them know what services were available in helping them to reach potential voters. And even though the Postal Service's Louisiana infrastructure was heavily damaged, limiting the types of mail we could handle, we lifted the embargo on advertising mail so candidates could reach voters.

Each absentee ballot could be tracked electronically as it moved through the mailstream, using our optional Confirm service. And I'm pleased to say that Confirm showed that every ballot that was voted reached its final destination.

The 2006 Louisiana election situation was the exception and not the rule - and I'm hoping that's how it stays. But our success in working with election officials there was based on our experience in other, equally challenging, absentee voter situations.

Even in times of war, we have delivered the most fundamental symbol of democracy - a ballot. One of the efforts we're proudest of is our contribution to seeing that the brave men and women of our armed forces serving abroad, including war zones like Iraq and Afghanistan, can vote. In the 2006 elections, almost 200,000 ballots were delivered to our troops around the world.

This is a complex undertaking that involves the Postal Service, the Department of Defense, and the Military Postal Service Administration. This requires extremely close coordination and detailed logistics planning, particularly for troops who are on the move in areas of active hostilities. To get ballots back to the troops' home states in time to be counted means that there can't be a single moment lost. The stakes are simply too great.

The men and women of our military are risking their lives in support of the democratic principles of our nation. We owe it to them to make sure that their votes - each and every one of them - are counted. This means that every process must be well thought out, thoroughly tested, and leave no room for error.

The Postal Service has had a role in every election ever conducted in the United States, including the debate on the drafting and ratification of the Constitution. The essays we know today as "The Federalist Papers" were originally the "op ed" pieces of their day in local newspapers. And those newspapers circulated throughout the original 13 colonies through the mail.

We recognize the vital role that mail plays in the American democratic process. We recognize that this role has expanded, through "no excuse necessary" absentee voting in more-and-more jurisdictions and through the switch to Oregon's mail voting system. We recognize that this role may continue to expand, as at least 19 more states explore some aspect of "vote by mail" legislation. And we recognize that mail can bring a great deal to the table, helping to reduce election costs while contributing to higher voter turnout.

Whatever the future holds, I'm committed to our continuing to work with Secretaries of State and local election officials to provide the tools and information you can use to meet the needs of your voters. Mail is the smart choice for elections - and the Postal Service is going to do everything possible to keep it that way.

And we want to give you every reason possible not only to continue your relationship with the Postal Service, but to expand it, as well. Mail is our most

democratic means of communication. Voting is at the heart of our democracy.
Together, they're a perfect match!

Thank you!