

A crisis of democracy and the 'Board of Vacancies'



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Consider our small corner of the political world. There are now four vacancies—and soon to be a fifth—out of the nine appointed positions on the Postal Service Board of Governors. Historically, these have not been particularly controversial or partisan positions. There is no such thing as red postal services or blue postal services, but the process for filling these positions has broken down.

So at a time of crisis for the Postal Service, when the Board of Governors should be shaping a vision for the 21st century, there will soon be more vacancies than appointed governors. I've joked that it might soon be renamed the Board of Vacancies. If not for the postmaster general and the deputy postmaster general, who serve as non-presidentially appointed members of the Board, the Board would not function at all. This has opened the way for the postmaster general to pursue a disastrous "shrink to survive" strategy that threatens to send the USPS into a death spiral. A weak Board has basically rubber-stamped it.

Even when Board appointments are made, the Capitol's poisonous politics often produces less-than-optimal results. Although the president technically makes such appointments, the tradition has been to give the Senate majority and minority leaders the power to recommend nominees to facilitate their confirmation by the Senate. As a result, governors are picked for political reasons unrelated to the needs of the Postal Service and packaged together in deals that leave the Postal Service worse off. For example, arguably none of the current members of the Board complies with the qualifications criteria laid out in the law, which says, among other things, that at least four

As we age, it's wise to resist the temptation to believe that things were always better in the "good old days."

With honest reflection, we realize they weren't entirely good. The 1950s and 1960s, for example, were a golden age in many ways for the United States—the economy boomed, the labor movement was powerful and the middle class prospered. But those days were not without major problems—remember Jim Crow, McCarthyism and the division over the war in Southeast Asia.

Still, looking at the dysfunction and partisan gridlock in today's Washington, it is hard to avoid feeling like the nation's politics have hit a low point in our history.

of the members must have experience running enterprises with at least 50,000 employees.

Although I do not question the intelligence or integrity of any members of the Board of Governors, it is clear that the Board is failing to meet the needs of the USPS at a time of crisis. Lacking business leaders and major national figures with experience leading and turning around organizations that face dangerous technological and market forces, the Board has backed a failing business strategy to gradually dismantle the networks that make the USPS valuable. Short-term cost-cutting is degrading our ability to adapt and grow in the future, and accelerating our decline.

Delegates to the NALC's 2012 Minneapolis Convention identified this governance crisis and called on the union to fight for fundamental reform of the way the Postal Service is managed and regulated by Congress. That is exactly what we have proposed in testimony to Congress and in our campaign to shape postal reform legislation. Fixing the Board of Governors is just the first step, but a crucial one. We need a modern, sophisticated board of directors at the USPS.

Such a board would stand up to Congress and demand a repeal or reform of the devastating pre-funding policy adopted in 2006—a policy that accounts for 90 percent of the financial losses reported this year. It would fight for the commercial freedom we need to fully exploit the first- and last-mile networks that make us unique. And it would recruit an executive management team with the skill and imagination to strengthen the Postal Service for the long haul.

But the problem goes far beyond the postal world. Fixing this situation requires fixing the dismal political culture in Washington.

Every day, there is new evidence of dysfunction and obstructionism. Mitch McConnell, the Senate minority leader, has used Senate filibuster rules to block a president's appointments to the National Labor Relations Board because his party wants to thwart any union organizing. McConnell has blocked judicial appointments to the DC Circuit of Appeals because the huge number of vacancies preserves a Republican majority on the appeals court that handles litigation concerning acts of Congress. To satisfy special interests in the banking industry, McConnell has stopped the president from implementing the Wall Street reform law passed after the crash of 2008. He is threatening to filibuster the nomination of Tom Perez to serve as secretary of labor. And he and House Speaker John Boehner are blocking efforts to implement the Affordable Care Act, or even to appoint members to an advisory board to eliminate wasteful spending in Medicare.

Sadly, the crisis of governance in the Postal Service is part of a larger crisis of our democracy. It may not be the worst partisan gridlock ever, but in the case of presidential appointments, it is hard to argue otherwise.