

## Here's how Congress can boost its ratings: postal reform



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**L**ast month, I wrote about the high cost of congressional gridlock, its effect on governing the U.S. Postal Service, and how it is affecting both USPS' Board of Governors and the Postal Regulatory Commission (PRC). I concluded that the only solution was change at the ballot box this fall.

One month later, there is a glimmer of hope from the least likely of sources: the gridlocked House of Representatives. In early May, I received an invitation to testify before the Oversight and Government Reform (OGR) Committee on May 11 at a hearing titled, "Reforming the Postal Service: Finding a Viable Solution."

This is very good news, even if the odds are stacked against us when it comes to enacting legislation in an election year with a lame-duck president. OGR Chairman Jason Chaffetz (R-UT) and Ranking Member Elijah Cummings (D-MD) have tried hard to swim against the tide of partisanship during this Congress. They famously hosted each other on visits to their respective congressional districts—which could not be more different from each other, one a rural district in Utah and the other an urban district centered in Baltimore. Together, with postal subcommittee leaders Mark Meadows (R-NC), Gerry Connolly (D-VA) and Stephen Lynch (D-MA), Chaffetz and Cummings have tried to work together on postal legislation.

Last fall, all of them met with me and the leaders of the other postal unions, along with the postmaster general and the heads of several business mailers and trade associations. We outlined a consensus approach to postal reform that would strengthen the Postal Service, stabilize its finances and pave the way for a thriving agency in the years to come. The May 11 hearing opened a slim chance that we can advance that consensus plan.

**Of course, it's not going to be easy. For one thing, one of the major components of our consensus plan may no longer be available to us.** That provision would have made permanent the 4.3 percent "exigent" postage increase that was enacted a few years ago to offset the impact of the Great Recession—an increase that has now expired (as unwisely ordered by the PRC). Our plan would have effectively frozen postage rates, at the level that existed before the rate reduction took effect on April 10, until the PRC completed its scheduled review of the entire rate-setting process for non-competitive products like

First Class Mail, Standard Mail and periodicals. Once rates declined in April, it became very difficult for many business mailers to support raising them back up—and even harder for some members of Congress to vote for a bill that would raise rates. (Ridiculously, a number of right-wing, anti-tax groups would consider such a move a tax increase.) We are working with our coalition partners to reach agreement on revenue alternatives.

For another thing, many of the OGR Committee's 43 members are relatively new to Congress and to the issues surrounding the Postal Service. We have a good sense of where the leaders are on the key issues, but we will need to engage the newer members to educate them about our proposed reforms. To be effective, we need your help in this work—nobody can lobby members of Congress better than the constituents who vote for them.

Finally, we must contend with the fact that there are very few days left in this year's congressional work schedule. Congress plans to adjourn from July 15 until Sept. 6, and then to adjourn again on Sept. 30 until after the election. Most of the summer and fall will be lost to campaigning. So it will be quite difficult to get legislation drafted, debated, passed by the appropriate committees and advanced through both chambers of Congress this year. But we believe it is possible to succeed, given the broad consensus in the postal industry on the central reforms needed to bolster the Postal Service.

That was the central message of my testimony in May: We can succeed because we have done the hard work to build consensus among postal labor, postal management and a broad cross-section of the mailing industry. We have developed a workable solution to the retiree health pre-funding mandate that poses the greatest threat to the financial health of the Postal Service. We are committed to working with our coalition partners on a sensible postage rate solution leading up to the PRC review. The key stakeholders are ready to fight for sensible reform; now all we need is the political will on Capitol Hill to legislate and compromise.

**These days, it's not easy to be a member of Congress. In its most recent survey on Americans' trust in their government (from November 2015), the Pew Research Center found that just 27 percent of Americans had a favorable view of Congress. Astoundingly, nearly seven out of every 10 Americans have an unfavorable view of our national legislature. By comparison, the highest-rated part of the government (84 percent favorable) was our very own agency, the U.S. Postal Service. Maybe the solution for one of the least popular parts of the government is to strengthen its most popular agency. Maybe a little of our favorability with the public would rub off on Congress. Not a bad plan for an election year.**