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Citizen Cabinet Survey: Bipartisan Majority Favors Giving US Postal Service More Freedom to Act Like a Business

Latest USPS financial report underscores need for reform

WASHINGTON – On the heels of the news that the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) posted a net loss of \$5.1 billion for FY2015, a new survey of a representative panel of registered voters finds large bipartisan majorities recommend Congress should let USPS act more like a business in ways that would dramatically improve its financial position, according to the results of a Citizen Cabinet survey released today by Voice Of the People. Panelists made their recommendations after being briefed on the fiscal problems facing the USPS and hearing pro and con arguments on various options for the Postal Service proposed by the Postmaster General and under consideration in Congress.

Most significantly, eight in ten panelists recommended dramatically reducing the requirement imposed by Congress to fully prefund future retiree health benefits – a requirement that has put USPS in the red for some years now. Overwhelming majorities found convincing the argument that ordinary businesses do not achieve such a high prefunding level and USPS should not have this unique requirement. However, majorities did not favor eliminating the requirement entirely, but rather lowering it by 20 percent and greatly extending the time allotted to provide funding.

Even larger majorities – nine in ten – recommended allowing USPS to provide new non-postal products and services. Panelists were informed that USPS is presently prohibited from offering such products and services and also heard the argument in defense of this prohibition – that it would have an unfair advantage relative to private companies offering non-postal products and services. Large majorities endorsed allowing such services as photocopying, Internet access, money transfers and a highly secure email system.

“Both Republicans and Democrats seem comfortable with the idea of their neighborhood post office being more like a Kinko’s,” said VOP President and PPC Director Steven Kull.

The Citizen Cabinet panel consisted of 2,256 registered voters including samples of the nation as a whole and three states: Maryland, Oklahoma and Virginia. The survey was conducted by the Program for Public Consultation (PPC), School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland and was fielded July 2 – August 12, 2015.

Unlike a standard poll, Citizen Cabinet surveys take respondents through an online process called a ‘policymaking simulation’ that gives respondents information and seeks to put them in the shoes of a policymaker. The simulation is vetted with Congressional staffers from both parties and other experts before it goes into the field.

Several other options for freeing up the postal service to act more like a business were considered:

- Allowing the Postal Service to lease its unused space in its warehouses, which it is not currently allowed to do – approved by 76 percent, including 77 percent of Republicans and 76 percent of Democrats.
- Closing as many as 5 percent of those post offices that are losing money in a given year – endorsed by two thirds (72 percent of Republicans, 63 percent of Democrats) – though only three in ten are ready to go as far as the Postal Service wants to go, which would be to close the 12 percent of all post offices that are not profitable.
- Ending Saturday letter delivery (while still delivering packages and Priority Mail) – supported by 67 percent, including 75 percent of Republicans and 60 percent of Democrats.
- Permitting postal rates to rise faster than inflation – supported by six in ten, including 56 percent of Republicans and 60 percent of Democrats.

“While Congress continues to have trouble finding common ground, a bipartisan majority of citizens is pointing the way to stability for the Postal Service,” Kull said.

However, some options were opposed:

- Converting most door-delivery mail boxes to curbside or cluster boxes – supported by only 41 percent, including 50 percent of Republicans and 33 percent of Democrats.
- Offering small-scale individual savings accounts – supported by only 32 percent, including 24 percent of Republicans and 37 percent of Democrats.

The Citizen Cabinet panel was recruited from a probability-based sample of registered voters. A total of 1,582 panelists were recruited from Nielsen Scarborough’s larger national panel; an additional 674 panelists were recruited by PPC by mail and telephone, using a random sample of households with registered voters provided by Survey Sampling International. Telephone and mailing were conducted by the research firm Communications for Research and additionally for Virginia by the Center for Survey Research at the University of Virginia and for Oklahoma by the Public Opinion Learning Laboratory at the University of Oklahoma.

The margin of error for the national panel was +/- 3.7 percent, while for the states it ranged from +/- 4.4 to 4.7 percent.

A report on the survey’s results, “How Americans Would Fix the U.S. Postal Service” can be found at: http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/USPS_Report.pdf

The survey’s questionnaire can be found at:
http://vop.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/USPS_Quaire.pdf

All are invited to participate in the same survey completed by the panelists. It can be found here: <http://vop.org/consultations/>

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