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First-Class Mail Service is Awful, Admitted Postal Service Late Friday

By: Paul Steidler

One of the oldest tricks in Washington, D.C. is to put out bad news late on a Friday in the hopes it will be missed. And the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) did just that when it [announced late Friday](#) that first-class mail service is now nearly as bad as it was during the worst period this summer. Eight days before the election, this is quite troubling.

On Friday, USPS announced that for the week ending October 16, only 85.58 percent of first-class mail was delivered on time, a drop of 0.57 percent from the preceding week. First-class mail service fell as low as 83.00 percent, for the week ending July 18. By contrast, for the quarter ending June 30, 2020, a full quarter during the pandemic, it was 90.82 percent.

First-Class Mail Service Performance

Week Ending	Percent of First-Class Mail Delivered on Time
October 16	85.58
October 9	86.15
October 2	85.97
September 25	84.23
September 18	86.75
July 18	83
June 30 (Quarter) ⁱ	90.82
Standard	96

Key concerns and takeaways are the following.

- **Many potential late mail-in ballots.** Using USPS's most recent numbers, if ten million ballots are mailed in by voters two days before their states' respective deadlines, 1.4 million will be late. The quickest standard for first-class mail is two-day delivery.
- **Voters should know of service hot spots.** First-class mail service varies significantly across the country. The Postal Service should announce those areas where first-class mail service is particularly troubling so voters can assess their options. The swing state of

Michigan appears to be especially problematic, based on an [October 20 announcement](#) from Senator Gary Peters.

- ***After an initial bounce back, service has deteriorated for the past month.*** From its July depths, first-class mail service bounced back some in August and early September, though it never has come close to reaching the second quarter levels. For the week ending September 18, 86.75 percent of first-class mail was delivered on time, over a full percentage point more than the 85.58 percent delivered on time for the week ending October 16.
- ***Other mail services are also facing difficulties.*** For marketing mail, 86.00 percent was delivered on time for the week ending October 16, compared with 86.90 percent for the week ending September 18. Periodicals had a slight improvement, rising to 77.43 percent for the week ending October 16 from 77.04 percent for the week ending September 18.
- ***Much greater transparency needed.*** USPS is only issuing press releases about these figures because of pressure from Congress, which has demanded this information on a weekly basis. USPS had been putting out the press releases on Thursdays. Daily announcements on first-class mail service should be made from now through Election Day. There should be regular announcements on areas where service is especially problematic.
- ***Relationship to packages needs to be probed.*** Congress also wants and gets information on package delivery, which is not announced in press releases by USPS. Congress should examine if package delivery has remained strong or improved while first-class mail service has tanked. USPS should also announce the percent of packages delivered on time. It is essential that resources are not diverted to package delivery that should go to first-class mail, especially now.
- ***Need for Holistic Changes.*** The time to deliver first-class mail has been slowing [since 2012](#). While delays have accelerated this year amid the pandemic, there needs to be a fundamental overhaul of first-class mail so that it returns to its previous levels of reliability. This is especially important as first-class mail is the Postal Service's most profitable operation.

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ⁱ The source for the quarter ending June 30 is a recording from the U.S. Postal Service Board of Governors held on August 7, 2020. As of October 25, this item had apparently been removed from the website, or at least could not be found. The area where the information had appeared is here: <https://about.usps.com/what/financials/briefings/welcome.htm>.