

Government Can't Count Ballots. How Can It Manage a Pandemic or Health Care?

Elections are a nasty business, but sometimes they can be clarifying.

We don't yet know who won the U.S. presidential election, and we may not for days or weeks to come. This stems largely from the ineptitude Americans witnessed on Election Tuesday.

It wasn't just the fact that pollsters once again [failed disastrously](#), or that networks [fumbled](#) their election coverage.

The bigger issue is that America's governing bodies look incapable of managing something as simple as a vote, something Americans have managed to do efficiently for centuries without the benefit of computers, digital communication, and mass transportation.

As an American, I find this a tad embarrassing. As the journalist Glenn Greenwald [observed Wednesday](#), countries with far fewer resources and less advanced technology regularly manage to hold speedy, efficient elections. This is something the U.S. failed to do on Tuesday, Greenwald noted.

The richest and most powerful country on earth – whether due to ineptitude, choice or some combination of both – has no ability to perform the simple task of counting votes in a minimally efficient or confidence-inspiring manner. As a result, the credibility of the voting process is severely impaired, and any residual authority the U.S. claims to “spread” democracy to lucky recipients of its benevolence around the world is close to obliterated.

At 7:30 a.m. ET on Wednesday, the day after the 2020 presidential elections, the results of the presidential race, as well as control of the Senate, are very much in doubt and in chaos. Watched by [the] rest of the world – deeply affected by who rules the still-imperialist superpower – the U.S. struggles and stumbles and staggers to engage in a simple task mastered by countless other less powerful and poorer countries: counting votes. Some states are not expected to [finish] their vote-counting until the end of this week or beyond.

This, to be blunt, is unacceptable.

The most prosperous country in the world cannot manage to do something as simple as *collect and count ballots*. Think about that for just a moment.

Unfortunately, this incompetence carries consequences that are quite real. Americans are beginning to lose faith in the integrity of elections. I'm not just talking about voters in the fever swamps of Twitter.

Many impressive journalists, thinkers, and students of various political stripes have expressed alarm at what they witnessed in the last 24 hours.

Things are getting very sketchy

– Kyle Kashuv (@KyleKashuv) [November 4, 2020](#)

Those 300,000 ballots not delivered after DeJoy ignored judge's ruling: many states had set Election Day as the cutoff for mail-in ballots.

Data Appears to Show USPS Failed to Deliver Mail Ballots from Voters Nationwide <https://t.co/MBnENp0l43> via [@politicususa](#)

– Sarah Reese Jones (@PoliticusSarah) [November 4, 2020](#)

After yesterday's alarmist court filing misrepresented that 300k mail ballots were "missing," aka scanned in and not scanned out, the USPS swept 220 postal facilities nationwide.

They found only 13 delayed ballots (all in Central PA), not 300k. They were immediately expedited.

– Ellie Rushing (@EllieRushing) [November 4, 2020](#)

What is going on in Arizona... <https://t.co/bNwrFhuJYK>

– Henry Rodgers (@henryrodgersdc) [November 4, 2020](#)

Many readers can probably relate to some of these concerns.

The reality is, the inability of election authorities to do something as simple as gather and count votes is undermining Americans' faith in the constitutional system. As Greenwald notes, this is dangerous; but it's also *rational*.

Because of the power and breadth of the federal government, there is a great deal at stake in presidential elections – too much at stake. Americans sense this, and when they see [mail-in ballots missing](#), precincts that [can't get votes counted](#), [voting delays](#), [errors](#) in data feeds, and other problems it naturally creates a feeling of uncertainty. Uncertainty in turn breeds distrust.

One could argue that this year's election was unique. Turnout was [unprecedented](#) (at least in raw numbers), perhaps in part because of the coronavirus pandemic and the record number of mail-in ballots.

Perhaps that's true. But the fact remains: how hard is it to collect and count ballots? I don't wish to disparage the people working these elections. The process is probably far more complicated than many Americans realize. But this is true

of most systems, which brings me to a key point.

Is collecting and counting ballots more difficult than running a vast health care system that involves pricing, insurance, medication, billing, and the very lives of individuals? The answer is no.

Is collecting and counting ballots more difficult than attempting to manage the spread of an invisible virus without ruining the [livelihoods](#), [spirits](#), educations, and very [lives](#) of hundreds of millions of people? Again, the answer is no.

In some ways, we should not be surprised to see governing bodies fail to manage something as elementary as an election. For decades we've watched the United States Post Office bungle something as simple as collecting and delivering mail. The USPS bleeds [billions of dollars](#) every year doing something a private company would make a profit doing, while delivering substandard service. (This is why libertarians have been arguing for [more than a century that](#) the Post Office should be subjected to competition.)

It's no coincidence that the election debacle of 2020 happened in the year the Post Office played its largest role ever. It was bound to happen.

As the economist [Ludwig von Mises](#) observed in his 1944 book [Bureaucracy](#), government agencies can never be anywhere near as efficient as private businesses. The competitive market compels entrepreneurs and their employees to competently and efficiently serve the buying public or go out of business. And profit-and-loss accounting enables them to figure out exactly what's working and what's not. In contrast, as Mises wrote:

Public administration, the handling of the government apparatus of coercion and compulsion, must necessarily be formalistic and bureaucratic. No reform can remove the bureaucratic features of the government's bureaus. It is useless to blame them for their slowness and slackness. It is

vain to lament over the fact that the assiduity, carefulness, and painstaking work of the average bureau clerk are, as a rule, below those of the average worker in private business. (...) In the absence of an unquestionable yardstick of success and failure it is almost impossible for the vast majority of men to find that incentive to utmost exertion that the money calculus of profit-seeking business easily provides. It is of no use to criticize the bureaucrat's pedantic observance of rigid rules and regulations. (...)

All such deficiencies are inherent in the performance of services which cannot be checked by money statements of profit and loss.

That isn't to say that bureaucracy is inherently evil. Mises clarified that, "bureaucracy in itself is neither good nor bad."

"There is a field," he continued, "namely, the handling of the apparatus of government, in which bureaucratic methods are required by necessity."

Elections, for example, are necessarily a bureaucratic affair, even if that means they often get bungled.

The big problem is when governments bureaucratize things that don't *need* to be bureaucratic. The evil lies in, as Mises said, "the expansion of the sphere in which bureaucratic management is applied."

For example, health care does not need to be bureaucratic. It can and has been provided through the market. To the extent that it has been, market forces and signals have made it better.

But if health care were to be socialized – as in a single-payer scheme – it would have to be managed bureaucratically and would inevitably suffer all the deficiencies of a

bureaucracy: ineptitude, slowness, neglect, etc.

Just imagine having to depend on the DMV or the USPS for your medical treatment. (If you've ever had to deal with the Veterans Administration, perhaps you don't have to imagine.)

One may object that our health care system already suffers from those failings and is already quite bureaucratic. But that is because the government is already so heavily involved in it. As Mises wrote, "Every kind of government meddling... breeds bureaucratism."

It is the absence of market forces and signals that makes governments inefficient. The normal mechanisms in markets that lead to efficiency, productivity, and prosperity simply cannot be replicated in a government system. Ever.

This is not to say some government systems cannot be managed more effectively than others. Naturally, they can. Just as many countries manage to hold elections and quickly get reliable results instead of the fiasco Americans witnessed this week.

The point is bureaucracy is inefficient by nature. We saw that Tuesday night.

And we should all be asking ourselves an important question: If government cannot manage something as simple as an election, how can it possibly make rational decisions about health care and pandemics that affect hundreds of millions of people?

—


This article was originally published on FEE.org. Read the [original article](#). 

Image Credit:

Flickr-Holly Hayes, CC BY-NC 2.0