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OPINION | REVIEW & OUTLOOK

How the Post Office Delivered for Hillary

Charges of a 'systematic' effort to violate the Hatch Act in 2016.



Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in New York, February 16. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *The Editorial Board*

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Congress is digging into a report that the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) and its union broke federal law by engineering time off for employees to campaign for Hillary Clinton. With any luck, the probe will kick off a wider reform of taxpayer-subsidized union activity.

Senate and House committee chairmen Ron Johnson and Trey Gowdy this week sent letters to 10 cabinet departments, requesting information about their policies governing what's known as union Leave Without Pay. The letter follows a July report by the Office of Special Counsel (OSC)—the federal agency that investigates government employment practices—revealing that senior leaders of the USPS “improperly coordinated” with the National Association of Letter Carriers to engineer time off for nearly 100 employees for election purposes.

Federal employees can apply for leave without pay, but this case was a union-engineered job. The union provided management with lists of names, and the USPS sent these out in email “directives,” telling local offices to grant specific leave requests.

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The employees were sometimes granted leave over the objections of local postmasters, who faced staffing shortages and overtime costs. The employees then joined an AFL-CIO program to work for Mrs. Clinton and other candidates, and were paid for their time off with union funds.

OSC calls this a “systematic” violation of the Hatch Act, which governs the political activities of federal workers. Government employees are allowed to engage in politics, but on their own time, and federal agencies are required to administer leave programs in a neutral fashion. In the USPS case, the OSC found an “institutional bias” in favor of union-backed candidates, meaning Democrats.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) separately looked at what is known as “official time,” when federal employees can do union work in lieu of their regular assignments. According to figures from fiscal 2014, federal employees racked up 3.47 million hours of official time, at a cost to taxpayers of \$163 million. A January report from the Government Accountability Office found that at the Department of Veterans Affairs federal employees spent 1.1 million hours performing union duties on official time in 2012.

While federal law permits official time, agencies aren’t required to track or report the hours. A 2012 GAO report implied that the actual number of official time hours, and the cost to government, was significantly higher than anything OPM reported. Not that OPM tries hard to keep track. Prior its March report, the last time it looked at official time was in 2012.

In May the House passed a bill sponsored by Rep. Dennis Ross (R., Fla.) that would require OPM to compile statistics on official time each year. Mr. Johnson should push it in the Senate while expanding his USPS probe to the broader misuse of government time.

The unions are howling about the Ross bill, and Senate Democrats may filibuster. But Republicans should be happy to stand on the side of more transparency and accountability. Taxpayers have a heavy enough lift without underwriting partisan politics.

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