

A Resurgent Gingrich Meets With Trump

NEW YORK (AP) — Surging in polls, Newt Gingrich declared confidently Monday that he plans to run a general election campaign in all 50 states should he win the Republican presidential nomination. But he also found himself defending comments he had made about poor children — hinting at the potential troubles and new scrutiny he faces in the race.

"I do not suggest children until about 14 or 15 years of age do heavy, dangerous janitorial work," Gingrich told reporters, seeking to explain previous remarks that rivals have used to criticize him. "On the other hand, there are a number of things done to clean buildings that are not heavy or dangerous."

At issue is a remark Gingrich made last week in which he suggested that poor children as young as 9 should work at least part time cleaning their schools in order to learn about work.

The Republican said his original point had been "distorted" to make him look insensitive, and he twice tried to explain where he stood. The idea, Gingrich said, would be "to get them into the world of work, get them into the opportunity to earn money, to get them into the habit of showing up and realizing that effort is rewarded and America is all about the work ethic."

Trying to show sensitivity on the issue, Gingrich also said he had persuaded Donald Trump — the real estate mogul with whom he met privately earlier in the day — to mentor a group of children from New York City's poorest schools.

Germany, France Seek Treaty Changes

PARIS (AP) — Seeking to restore confidence in the euro, the leaders of France and Germany jointly called on Monday for changes to the European Union treaty so that countries using the euro would face automatic penalties if budget deficits ran too high.

But not everyone on Wall Street was reassured that Europe would get control of its 2-year-old debt crisis.

Stock prices rose and borrowing costs for European governments dropped sharply in response to the changes proposed by French President Nicolas Sarkozy and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. But some of the optimism faded late Monday when Standard and Poor's threatened to cut its credit ratings on 15 eurozone countries, including the likes of Germany, France and Austria which have been considered Europe's safest government debt issuers.

The announcement came only hours after Sarkozy and Merkel revealed sweeping plans to change the EU treaty in an effort to keep tighter checks on overspending nations. The proposal is set to form the basis of discussions at a summit of EU leaders on Thursday and Friday that is expected to provide a blueprint for an exit from the crisis.

While the Franco-German plan would tie the 17-eurozone nations closer together, a tighter union would likely also result in heavier financial burdens for the region's stronger economies, which have already put up billions of euros to rescue Greece, Ireland and Portugal.

Obama, GOP Candidates Scrap Over Israel

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama and his Republican opponents are clashing over U.S. policy toward Israel as each side jockey for support from Jewish voters, who could be critical in the 2012 election.

Aiming to cast Obama as unfairly harsh toward Israel and soft on the Palestinians, Republican presidential hopefuls Mitt Romney and Newt Gingrich have called on the president to fire his ambassador to Belgium. The envoy, Howard Gutman, had said that some anti-Semitism stemmed from tensions between Israel and the Palestinians; Romney and Gingrich say his remarks unfairly blamed Israel.

The White House says Obama has a strong record on support for Israel, and quickly fired back with a statement condemning "anti-Semitism in all its forms." The State Department said Gutman would remain in his job.

Republicans also challenged Obama's assertion at a fundraiser last week that "this administration has done more in terms of the security of the state of Israel than any previous administration." Romney said Obama has "repeatedly thrown Israel under the bus" — an accusation the Republican National Committee repeated Monday.

Firing back, Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz called Romney's comments "outrageous" and questioned his own policies. The White House cited military aid to Israel and support at the United Nations, and pointed to statements from Israeli officials backing up Obama's assertion.

Elderly Women Complain About Security Check

NEW YORK (AP) — With age come such things as catheters, colostomy bags and adult diapers. Now add another indignity to getting old — having to drop your pants and show these things to a complete stranger.

Two women in their 80s put the Transportation Security Administration on the defensive this week by going public about their embarrassment during screenings in a private room at Kennedy Airport. One claimed she was forced to lower her pants and underwear in front of an agent so that her back brace could be inspected. Another said agents made her pull down her waistband to show her colostomy bag.

While not confirming some of the details, the TSA said that its agents were justified in one case and that it is still investigating the other. But experts said the potential for such searches will increase as the U.S. population ages and receives prosthetics and other medical devices, some of which cannot go through screening machines.

"You have pacemakers, you have artificial hips, you have artificial knees," said Rep. Peter King, R-N.Y., chairman of the House Homeland Security Committee. "As we get older and we keep ourselves together, it's going to take more and more surgery. There's going to be more and more medical improvements, but that can create what appears to be a security issue."

Protesters Accuse Russian Election Rigged

MOSCOW (AP) — Several thousand protesters took to the streets Monday night and accused Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's party of rigging this weekend's parliamentary election in which it won the largest share of the seats.

It was perhaps the biggest opposition rally in years and ended with police detaining about 300 activists. A group of several hundred marched toward the Central Elections Commission near the Kremlin, but were stopped by riot police and taken away in buses.

Estimates of the number of protesters ranged from 5,000 to 10,000. They chanted "Russia without Putin" and accused his United Russia party of stealing votes.

In St. Petersburg, police detained about 120 protesters.

United Russia won about 50 percent of Sunday's vote, a result that opposition politicians and election monitors said was inflated because of ballot-box stuffing and other vote fraud. It was a significant drop from the last election, when the party took 64 percent.

Postal Cutbacks To Delay First-Class Mail

BY JONATHAN FAHEY
AP Business Writer

NEW YORK — Utility bills are paid, legal briefs are filed and the Christmas shopping all gets done online. But for magazines, clothing catalogues and movies, the mail still matters.

For some mail-dependent businesses, quick and cheap first-class mail service from the U.S. Postal Service is still the best way to reach prospective customers and subscribers. And for many, it's still an important way to get paid.

The Postal Service, which has been losing money for five years, said Monday that it is shuttering more than 200 mail processing centers, adding at least a day's wait for many first-class deliveries. The news was met with concern and frustration from some businesses — and shrugs from others that long ago stopped relying on the post office.

"It's less of a disaster than it would have been 10 years ago, but it'll be a cash flow crunch for some companies," said Todd McCracken, president and chief executive of the National Small Business Association. "It'll be longer to get your invoice, and longer to get a check back."

First-class mail is supposed to arrive at U.S. homes and businesses in one to three days; about 42 percent of it arrives in one day. The cutbacks will back up deliveries to two to three days; periodicals could take up to nine days.

Cookie Driscoll of Fairfield, Pa., designs and sells decorative animal stickers to gift shops. She uses the Postal Service for almost all deliveries because prices are low and predictable, and delivery is fast. She also receives most of her income by paper checks through the mail.

"The trickle-down effect of this is going to be frustrating," she said. "It's not going to put me out of business but it's an irritant. Every time small businesses turn around we get hit with something else."

The change could represent an operational headache for L.L. Bean, which mails 250 million catalogues a year to sell outdoor clothing and equipment. Now the company knows the day its catalogues will arrive in homes, and it can put on extra staff at call centers on the appointed day. It won't be able to do that anymore.

"We are increasingly concerned about any proposal that would degrade the level of service such as greater variability in delivery deadlines," said Carolyn Beem, an L.L. Bean spokeswoman.

Most Netflix customers who subscribe to the company's DVD-by-mail service watch movies on the weekends and should still be able to return movies Monday and have new ones on Friday, according to Michael Pachter, an analyst at the investment firm Wedbush. But other users will notice a delay, he said.

Netflix — one of the Postal Service's biggest customers, with expenses of up to \$600 million a year — has repeatedly warned in regulatory filings that any Postal Service cutbacks that delay its DVD-by-mail deliveries will make it more difficult to keep subscribers happy. And, with encouragement from Netflix, customers are already abandoning mail service for movies delivered online.

But for many companies, the changes will have no effect. Some have already stopped relying on the Postal Service, moving online for billing or to overnight companies FedEx Corp. and United Parcel Service Inc. for critical deliveries. First-class mail volume is 78 billion per year, down from a peak of 104 billion in 2001. It is projected to drop by roughly half by 2020.

The healthcare company Medco said in a statement that it did not expect the postal changes to have a major effect on its business, although the online drug distributor used the Postal Service to send most of its 110 million drug shipments last year.

Keith Ashmus, an attorney at Frantz Ward in Cleveland, said his office can now file pleadings and motions electronically, so it sends far less mail than it used to. Documents served by mail are allowed three days to arrive, which means there will still be enough time for delivery by first class even with the changes.

In some cases, magazine publishers and other bulk mailers who drop off shipments at processing centers that remain open may be able to get their materials delivered the next day.

A spokesman for the MPA-the Association of Magazine Media, a magazine trade group, said the changes may cause printing and transportation problems for weekly publications.

The service changes will almost certainly send more business activity online and to FedEx and UPS.

David Ross, a transportation analyst at investment firm Stifel Nicolaus predicts the new business from postal cutbacks will stem the losses FedEx and UPS saw in overnight document deliveries during the recession.

The 28,000 job cuts announced by the Postal Service likely won't make a big difference to the economy or job market, economists say. Private delivery companies will probably get more business as the Postal Service cuts back.

"It adds to the fear about higher unemployment and inadequate job growth," said Jonathan Basile, an economist at Credit Suisse. But when the cuts are spread over several months, in an economy with about 140 million jobs, there won't be a large impact, he said.

Postal Service employment has been declining for years. The service has cut more than 30,000 jobs in the past year, the government's Friday employment report showed.

RECYCLING CHRISTMAS



OLIVIER DOULIERY/ABACA PRESS/MCT
The Occupy DC Christmas tree, made of plastic bottles and plastic bags, is on display at Freedom Plaza, Monday, in Washington, DC.

Feds To Allow Use Of Medicare Data To Rate Doctor Performance

BY RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Picking a specialist for a delicate medical procedure like a heart bypass could soon get easier.

The government announced Monday that Medicare will finally allow its extensive claims database to be used by employers, insurance companies and consumer groups to produce report cards on local doctors and hospitals.

By analyzing masses of billing records, experts can glean such critical information as how often a doctor has performed a particular procedure and get a general sense of problems such as preventable complications.

Compiled in an easily understood format and released to the public, medical report cards could become a powerful tool for promoting quality care and reducing waste.

"This is a giant step forward in making our health care system more transparent," said Marilyn Tavenner, Medicare's acting administrator. Consumers could start seeing performance reports by late 2012, said spokesman Brian Cook.

While doctors will be individually identifiable through the Medicare files, personal data on their patients will remain confidential.

Medicare officials say they expect nonprofit groups around the country such as the Pacific Business Group on Health in San Francisco and Minnesota Community Measurement in Minneapolis to

jump at the chance to use the data. With 47 million beneficiaries and virtually every doctor and hospital in the country participating, Medicare's database is considered the mother lode of health care information.

Such research has been off-limits until now because of a decades-old court ruling that releasing the information would violate the privacy of doctors. Insurance companies tried to fill the gap using their own claims data, but their files were nowhere near as comprehensive as Medicare's.

Following appeals from lawmakers of both parties on Capitol Hill, President Barack Obama's health care overhaul changed federal law to explicitly authorize release of the information. Medicare followed through in regulations issued Monday.

Consumer groups were still poring over the fine print, but employer groups lauded the move by the government.

"There is pent-up demand for this data because everyone wants to be a more informed, intelligent consumer, especially as health care costs are still rising," said Maria Ghazal, policy director at the Business Roundtable, which represents CEOs of major companies providing coverage to some 35 million employees, retirees and family members.

Companies will use the data analyses in their annual updates to their insurance plans. But Ghazal said they also want to put report cards directly in the hands of their employees.

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