

# New bill could make Election Day a federal holiday

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Image 1. People wait in a long line in Washington, D.C., to cast their ballots in the 2012 U.S. presidential election. Photo: Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images

In January, House Democrats introduced their first piece of legislation in the new Congress. It's an anti-corruption bill that proposes making Election Day a federal holiday and encourages private employers to give their workers the day off, too.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell dismissed the legislation on the Senate floor, calling it a "power grab" by Democrats. He was later criticized by progressive lawmakers on Twitter, including Democratic Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, who tweeted that "voting isn't a 'power grab.' It's democracy, and it's literally the entire point of our representative government."

According to the Pew Research Center, Americans on both sides of the aisle support making Election Day a national holiday: 71 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Republicans favor the idea.

Voting rights groups have been pushing for years to make Election Day a holiday, arguing that it would allow working voters greater opportunity to cast their ballots. The measure has been

included in several voting rights bills, but they never passed.

USA Today spoke to three experts about what it would be like if the United States did actually have Election Day as a holiday.

### **It Would Remove Barriers To Getting To The Polls**

"Making election day a holiday would transform the culture around voting in our country," said Kristen Clarke. She is the president and executive director of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. "Enduring long lines, obtaining access to childcare, finding the money to take public transportation to the polls are all real barriers that make it harder for people to exercise their voice on Election Day. By clearing away some of those hurdles, we would inevitably make it easier for people to participate."

The United States Census Bureau conducted a survey of about 19 million registered voters who did not vote in the 2016 general election. Busy schedules was the main reason 14.3 percent of those surveyed didn't cast a ballot. A little more than 60 percent of U.S. citizens cast ballots in the 2016 presidential election, and whites made up 73.3 percent of them. Those who did not vote "were more likely to be younger, less educated, less affluent, and nonwhite."

Clarke said it's difficult to speculate whether Democrats or Republicans would benefit more from an election holiday. She said she would expect to see some specific groups with higher participation rates, though, including working mothers, young people, and low-income workers.

In the 2016 presidential election, 53 percent of Americans making under \$30,000 a year voted Democratic and 41 percent voted Republican. Among voters aged 18 to 29, 55 percent voted Democratic and 37 percent voted Republican. In the 2018 midterm elections, 67 percent of voters aged 18 to 29 favored the Democratic candidate.

### **The U.S. Ranks Low For Voter Turnout**

Of the 36 member countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), 27 countries hold their national elections on a weekend. Israel and South Korea hold theirs on weekdays, but they're national holidays.

"We have among the lowest turnout rates of any modern democracy in the world today," Clarke said. In data analyzed by the Pew Research Center, the U.S. ranks 26th in voter turnout.

### **It Could Send A Message About Civic Participation**

Holly Jackson is an associate professor of English at the University of Massachusetts. She says making Election Day a federal holiday would send a strong message about American values.

While Election Day has never been an official federal holiday, it was once observed as a holiday in communities across the country, she said. Many businesses closed for the day, and some states declared an official holiday, which resulted in higher voter turnout. And, she added, "Even children too



young to vote were involved in these festivities, which got them in the practice of civic participation and instilled a sense that it was important and fun."

"Observing a holiday for Election Day is not only about allowing working people to access the polls," Jackson said. "It's a starting point for creating a culture in which the democratic process is honored and celebrated."

### **It Would Make Election Day A National Holiday**

Laws governing whether people get time off to vote vary widely across the country. Election Day is a paid holiday for state workers in 13 states, and some states that allow time off to vote will penalize employers that keep workers from exercising that right. In other states, however, voters only get a limited amount of time to go to the polls, and they don't necessarily have to be paid if they do. In 20 states, you can be fired for taking time off to vote.

In addition to making Election Day a federal holiday, the bill Democrats introduced would also promote automatic voter registration and early voting. These measures, which are getting less attention, are what create an "election period" rather than a single Election Day. They are the kinds of conveniences that may ultimately be more effective than a holiday itself.

### **It Could Help People Understand Their Voting Rights**

Paula Brantner is a senior advisor at Workplace Fairness. She says state laws that govern voting rights vary so widely, most people don't even know what protections they have on Election Day. The Workplace Fairness website, which provides information about workers' rights, gets between 2.5 to 4 million visitors a year, and the biggest spike in visitors is on Election Day.

"People are scrambling to find out this information ... and unfortunately sometimes you have to notify your employer in advance, and you've lost your window of opportunity to do that," she said.

In Tennessee, for example, some employees are given time off to vote. However, employees do not get time off to vote if their workday begins more than three hours after polls open or ends more than three hours before polls close.

"What about carpool, and getting your kid to school? Even those three hours may not be enough," Brantner said. "What if you already have an hour and a half commute to work? Or the polling place is in the opposite direction of where you have to go?"

## Quiz

- 1 Read the following sentences from the sections "It Would Remove Barriers To Getting To The Polls" and "It Would Make Election Day A National Holiday."

*"Enduring long lines, obtaining access to child care, finding the money to take public transportation to the polls are all real barriers that make it harder for people to exercise their voice on Election Day."*

*In addition to making Election Day a federal holiday, the bill Democrats introduced would also promote automatic voter registration and early voting.*

Which answer choice BEST describes how the sentences help to develop a central idea of the article?

- (A) They present a list of problems that keep people from voting and then describe aspects of the new bill that might solve them.
- (B) They present two proposed solutions for problems with low voter turnout that are outlined in the new bill.
- (C) They present a cause of low voter turnout on Election Day and its effects on attitudes toward voting.
- (D) They present two contrasting effects of the recent proposal to make Election Day a national holiday.

- 2 Read the final section of the article, "It Could Help People Understand Their Voting Rights."

What is MOST LIKELY the reason the author chose to conclude the article with these four paragraphs?

- (A) to emphasize the variation between laws in different states regarding requirements to give time off to vote on Election Day
- (B) to illustrate that the failure to have a federal holiday for Election Day results in low turnout and confusion about voting laws
- (C) to elaborate on the specific effects that being a single parent can have on the ability to vote without an Election Day holiday
- (D) to introduce the Workplace Fairness website as a good resource for voters until legislation makes Election Day a federal holiday

- 3 How does the author appeal to the reader's sense of logic?

- (A) by describing polls that show support for an election holiday among a majority of Americans, and then presenting evidence about how America compares with other democracies in voter turnout
- (B) by analyzing statistics about the number of people who have to work during election hours, and then suggesting that the democratic process should be honored and celebrated everywhere
- (C) by citing Republican lawmakers' dismissal of the proposed legislation for an election holiday, and then elaborating on the Democratic responses to this approach to voters' rights
- (D) by explaining the state laws that often prevent people from voting, and then highlighting data about how many more people voted after those laws were effectively eliminated

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Which answer choice explains HOW the author uses rhetoric in this paragraph to construct the overall argument?

- (A) The author uses a statement of authority about the history of Election Day to demonstrate growing frustration over a general lack of interest in voting.
- (B) The author uses an exaggeration about Election Day to suggest that an election holiday would receive more enthusiasm from the public than is likely.
- (C) The author uses a reference to the importance of Election Day in America's past to appeal to the reader's sense of morality and responsibility.
- (D) The author uses an ironic statement about children interested in voting on Election Day to appeal to the reader's sense of justice and logic.