

America has a plethora of national holidays, from Columbus Day to Presidents' Day and the 4th of July. Yet, one essential time is not a national holiday: Election Day. The day when perhaps the most crucial decision is made - when the course of history is decided every two years - has not yet been marked as a moment for national pause and reflection. Instead, it is a day like any other, with work and school, and millions of Americans, overwhelmed with everyday obligations, never make it to the polls. Creating a national holiday on Election Day is a critical step towards increasing voter turnout in the United States.

Consistently, the primary reason registered non-voters give for not voting is being too busy. In 2014, two-thirds of registered voters who never made it to the polls said they simply could not fit it into their packed schedules, and 35% said voting conflicted with work or school.¹ If voters did not have to work on Election Day, voting turnout rates could increase by as much as 5 to 6 percentage points.² However, moving Election Day to a weekend would risk alienating religious groups and upsetting the long-honored, deeply ingrained tradition of elections being held on Tuesdays. Instead, making Election Day a national holiday would both remove an entrenched barrier to voting and allow Americans to step back and honor the significance of the day. The holiday could even be a time to host and attend "get out the vote" rallies and "poll parties," which could generate enthusiasm for voting and create a social, enticing atmosphere around polling places. In one case study, Yale researchers hosted Election Day celebrations in Connecticut and New Hampshire and found an attributable increase in voter turnout, with one precinct seeing a 6.5% bump in turnout.³ A national Election Day holiday would allow for more such celebrations and make millions of Americans put aside the day and recognize it for what it is - a day like no other.

Freeing voters of work and school on Election Day would not only allow them to get to the polls, but would also make voting easier by reducing lines at polling places. When Americans must juggle going to the polls around their work schedule, they vote en masse during the mornings, at lunchtime, or during the evening, creating unmanageable congestion. At 5 p.m., polling places see a 150% increase in the number of voters, a surge that continues until 7 p.m.⁴ For those two hours, workers and ballot machines are overwhelmed and wait times stretch from minutes into hours. Those lines are a major deterrent from voting. In 2004, at least 7,000 residents of Franklin

¹ "Little Enthusiasm, Familiar Divisions After the GOP's Big Midterm Victory," Pew Research Center, November 12th, 2014, July 25th, 2016. <http://www.people-press.org/2014/11/12/little-enthusiasm-familiar-divisions-after-the-gops-big-midterm-victory/>

² Rafael Lopez Pintor, et al, *Voter Turnout Since 1945*. (Stockholm, Sweden: International Idea, 2002): 116.

³ Donald P. Green, James P. Glaser, and Elizabeth M. Addonizio, *Putting the Party Back into Politics: An Experiment Testing Whether Election Day Festivals Increase Turnout*. (The American Political Science Association 1.4, 2007): 721-727.

⁴ Douglas M. Spencer and Zachary S. Markovits, *Long Lines at Polling Stations? Observations from an Election Day Field Study*. (University of Connecticut Election Law Journal 9.1, 2010): 9.

County opted not to vote faced with long lines.⁵ In 2008, 11% of non-voters surveyed cited long lines as a major reason for not voting, which suggests that long wait-times may have cost as many as 2.6 million votes.⁶ Many would-be voters feel that it is not worth waiting over an hour in line to cast a vote that they feel will have little impact on their government. For others, it is not merely a matter of convenience. Many Americans have little flexibility with their work schedules, and some face long commutes in the mornings and evenings. If voting cannot be done in their brief lunch hour or the time between when polls open or close and their work shift begins or ends, then they will not be able to vote at all. If Americans no longer had to work on Election Day, morning, evening, and lunchtime congestion would disappear and voters would instead disperse themselves throughout the day. Lines at the polls would become reasonable, rather than overwhelming, and millions more Americans would get the opportunity to cast their ballots.

Low-income, often minority individuals would benefit the most from less Election Day congestion. Due to fewer resources, voting often takes longer at polling places in low-income, minority precincts, and thus, when voters come clustered in the morning, at lunchtime, or in the evening, lines at these sites become massive. In South Carolina, minority voters comprised 69% of the electorate in the ten precincts with the longest lines, compared to the statewide average of 27%.⁷ Long lines, in turn, correspond to lower minority turnout, as minority voters arrive at polling places but are forced to leave before casting their ballots. Establishing a national holiday on Election Day would help enfranchise low-income minorities and give them a stronger voice in elections.

Expecting Americans to fit voting into their hectic weekday schedules is often too much to ask, and no American should have to choose between going to work and going to vote. Making Election Day a national holiday is a simple fix that would break down countless barriers between Americans and the ballot box. Election Day is one of the most important days on the nation's calendar - and it is time for the government's policy to reflect that.

⁵ Dale Tavis, *Democracy Undone*. (Altadena, Montreal: Bitingduck Press, 2012): 84.

⁶ M. Alvarez, et al, *2008 Survey of the Performance of American Elections—Final Report*. (Boston, MA: Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2009): 36.

⁷ Myrna Perez, Amanda Mellilo, and Christopher Famighetti. *Election Day Long Lines: Resource Allocation*. (New York, NY: Brennan Center for Justice, 2014): 1.

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