

Should Election Day Be a Federal Holiday?

An estimated 156 million Americans voted this November in elections from the local to the national. That is roughly 65% of the U.S. population eligible for voting. This is impressive historically speaking, but it raises an important question: why isn't voter turnout even higher? More importantly, how can we make voting more accessible for everyone?

Access to the ballot box has never been easy in America. Early in the nation's history, voting was strictly a right of white, male property holders. Women, African Americans, Native Americans, and the poor had no place in the democratic process whatsoever. Today, many of these provisions have indeed changed, but only after hard-fought battles.

The 15th Amendment was designed to protect the voting rights of Black men after the Civil War, but discriminatory practices like literacy tests, poll taxes, and Jim Crow laws effectively nullified those rights for decades. Women didn't gain the right to vote until 1920, after years of relentless campaigning by suffragists. Even young Americans weren't fully included until 1971, when the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18.

These milestones represented real advances but did not clear all barriers. Today, new barriers—like restrictive voter ID laws, polling place closures, and purging of voter rolls—continue to disproportionately affect marginalized groups, including minorities, low-income families, and rural communities.

One idea to boost voter turnout is to turn Election Day into a federal holiday. The logic behind it is simple: a day off would give people more time to focus on voting, rather than having to balance work or family duties. For hourly workers who can't afford to take time off, a federally-recognized holiday could make a significant difference.

Some do warn, however, that this may not be enough. Federal holidays don't guarantee time off for everyone—hourly workers in healthcare and other essential industries often have to work regardless. For these workers, it would amount to no more than perhaps a symbolic holiday.

Additionally, focusing solely on creating a holiday could distract from more fundamental issues in voting. If improving voter turnout is the real goal, then a national holiday would need to be part of a larger strategy that encompasses the following additional reforms:

Automatic Voter Registration

Automatically registering eligible citizens to vote when they interact with government agencies would eliminate a significant barrier. In states such as Oregon that have implemented this system, turnout rates are reported higher than the national average.

Increased Early Voting and Vote-by-Mail Options

Extending early voting periods and making mail-in voting widely accessible can help those with demanding schedules or limited transportation options participate more easily.

Modernizing Election Infrastructure

Updates in voting machines, training for the poll workers, and appropriate staffing in the polling locations would make the system of voting smoother, reducing frustration for voters.

Restoration of Voting Rights Act Protections

The decision of the Supreme Court in *Shelby County v. Holder* in 2013 relaxed the rules on federal oversight of voting laws in states with a history of voter suppression. Restoring these protections will help bar resurgence of old discriminatory practices.

Even if it may not be enough on its own, an Election Day made federal holiday still has merit. It would send a powerful signal that voting is a fundamental civic duty worthy of prioritization. For many Americans, especially those juggling work and family, having a dedicated day off could make a real difference.

Beyond practical considerations, a holiday could also foster a greater sense of national unity, much like the 4th of July. Imagine communities coming together not just for voting, but for parades, voter drives, and public events that remind us of our shared stake in the nation's future. Such a holiday would go a long way in reaffirming the essence of democracy.

References:

"What the U.S. Election Looks Like From Abroad." *Foreign Policy*, 8 Nov. 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/11/08/us-election-trump-data-comparison-india-indonesia-mexico/>.

"Voting Rights: A Short History." *Carnegie Corporation of New York*, <https://www.carnegie.org/our-work/article/voting-rights-timeline/>. Accessed 15 Nov. 2024.