



EAVP

Office of the
External Affairs
Vice President

ASUC Proposal to Make Election Day a Non-Instructional Day

Endorsed by the ASUC Vote Coalition

- **SUMMARY**
- **BACKGROUND**
- **SUGGESTED STRUCTURE OF ELECTION DAY**
- **CONCLUSION**

SUMMARY

The United States historically has an abysmal voter turnout rate for both general and midterm elections, severely debilitating our civic institutions and democratic process. In the 2016 elections, only 55.7% of Americans voted.¹ Student participation in elections has been recorded as even lower than the average voter turnout rate; according to the Washington Post, only 1 in 5 students voted in the 2014 midterm elections.² In most major studies conducted on why citizens didn't vote, the primary reason is lack of time. Time constraints, such as midterms, class, extracurricular activities, jobs, and health and counseling appointments, in aggregate, seriously hinder students' ability to carve out an appropriate amount of time in their schedule to go to a polling station and vote. It is imperative that as many students as possible vote while still in college as studies have shown that voting at a young age increases your likelihood for voting for the rest of your life.³ Election Day and the significance it holds to our democracy should be better honored by mandating that the day of be a non-instructional day at UC Berkeley. In doing so, students will have substantial time to fulfill their civic duty, which will increase student voter turnout both for the current election cycle and for election cycles to come. Election Day's importance as a keystone of our democracy will also be better recognized on our campus.

BACKGROUND

The United States' voter turnout rate is substantially lower than other countries of similar economic levels - the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance found that

¹ <https://democracychronicles.org/national-holiday/>

² https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/want-americans-to-vote-give-them-the-day-off/2018/10/10/5bde4b1a-ccae-11e8-920f-dd52e1ae4570_story.html?utm_term=.68d2fe700f18

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0261379412000212>

the United States ranks as the 139th country out of 172 countries for voter turnout.⁴ Despite these low turnout rates, Americans cite voting as one of the fundamentals of the country's democracy—in a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, 74% of respondents ranked election participation as a very important determinant of good citizenship—above paying taxes and following the law.⁵ Even though the countries that outdo the United States when it comes to voter participation have different methods of electing officials, many nations hold one thing in common: they have the day off on Election Day. Countries like France, Germany, and India all recognize Election Day as a national holiday or hold elections on the weekend in order to increase voter turnout.

It remains difficult for UC Berkeley students to find the opportunity to vote on Election Day. Students are already burdened with intense course loads, part-time jobs, and extracurricular commitments that make it hard to set aside the time to go to the polls. If they do make that choice, many find themselves unsure where to vote, what to vote for, and how long the entire process will take. Over-encumbered by such indecision, students will opt out entirely. A 2008 survey conducted by the US Census Bureau found that the most commonly cited reason for not voting among nonvoters was “being too busy”.⁶ A 2014 Pew Research Center report surveyed registered voters who said they didn't cast a ballot that year. Two-thirds said they didn't vote because they didn't have time. More than half of that group - 35% of the total - said conflicts with work or school schedules got in the way.⁷ A 2014 Tufts survey showed similar results, as the most commonly cited reason among young registered voters for not voting was, again, having scheduling conflicts.⁸ Of the non-voters surveyed by the US Census Bureau about the 2008 presidential election, the 2012 presidential election, and numerous other elections, the most commonly cited reason for not voting was being too busy or having conflicting work schedules.⁹ As UC Riverside's student body president, Semi Cole, stated, “With current institutional barriers at play, we recognize the difficulty for students with multiple classes and more than one job in actually making it to the polls. With students not having the time or energy to participate in the political process, we hope to empower our constituency with the promise of making an impact with freedom from class and on-campus work obligations to do so.”¹⁰

Other campuses have aimed to solve these issues. At Rutgers University, student Senator Christopher Markosian claims that academic time constraints and inconveniently located polling places prevented many students from participating in the 2016 election. Many students also were not registered at polling places close to campus, making it difficult for them to find their polling

⁴ <https://democracychronicles.org/national-holiday/>

⁵ <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/democracy/reports/2018/07/11/453319/increasing-voter-participation-america/>

⁶ <https://www.businessinsider.com/is-election-day-a-national-holiday-2016-11>

⁷ https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2018/07/06/patagonia-is-giving-its-workers-election-day-off-and-says-you-should-too/?utm_term=.9e9a9b66a982

⁸ <https://www.businessinsider.com/is-election-day-a-national-holiday-2016-11> <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57b8c7ce15d5dbf599fb46ab/t/57fffc482e69cfe207ed89e4/1476394059592/UCDavisCCEPPolicyBrief92014YouthVote.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.businessinsider.com/is-election-day-a-national-holiday-2016-11>

¹⁰ <https://www.highlandernews.org/33897/asucr-passes-resolution-make-election-day-holiday/>

location and actually vote.¹¹ To resolve these problems, student government at Rutgers devised a solution: make election day a university holiday. Students would have more time to process information, understand where and how to vote, and be able to validly complete such a time-consuming yet civically necessary task. Unfortunately, faculty leaders at Rutgers have held back this idea, despite the fact that 95% of respondents to a student-body-wide poll have stated that they would be more likely to vote if election day was a holiday. The situation there echos what students face in Berkeley: although there exists widespread enthusiasm amongst students about elections, University rules make participation more difficult regardless.

Student leaders and professors alike are calling for a change to Election Days on college campuses across the nation. Adam Bonica and Michael McFaul of Stanford University assert that professors at colleges and universities also should cancel classes on Election Day to give students time to vote: “On this one day, instead of preparing for the future, students should be taking part in deciding it.”¹² Leonard Steinhorn of American University argues that every college and university should institute a fall break wrapped around Election Day, giving students time off not only to vote but also to knock on doors and become a vital part of the democracy whose reins they will soon take. The goal should be to get more young people voting and expressing their views about our collective future.¹³ At UC Berkeley, the ASUC Senate has already passed a resolution calling for Election Day to become a campus holiday.¹⁴

Making Election Day a National Holiday (or, more generally, a day off for citizens or students) is by no means a revolutionary feat in contemporary society. Not only do many other countries around the world have their respective election days as free days for their citizens, Election Day remains a civic holiday in eight states and the territory of Puerto Rico. Some schools, such as Columbia University and Princeton University, have made Election Day into a campus-wide holiday. Many businesses across the country, including Patagonia, Survey Monkey, Spotify, Pinterest, Dropbox, Walmart, Lyft, and Gap Inc. all give their workers the day off to vote on Election Day. Columbia University political scientist Donald Green and his colleagues conducted a study to determine whether Election Day “festivals”, or events in which citizens receive Election Day off and celebrate voting, increase voter turnout. In 2006 and 2016, they conducted experiments in which they randomly selected a handful of precincts across the country in which to hold festivals celebrating Election Day. These researchers estimate that the festivals increased voter turnout by four to six percent. They concluded that “election festivals rank among the most effective and economically efficient methods of increasing voter turnout.”¹⁵

¹¹<http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2017/02/student-pushes-administrators-to-acknowledge-election-day-as-university-holiday>

¹²https://www.postandcourier.com/opinion/commentary/make-election-day-a-national-holiday/article_40cff750-ce49-11e8-ae90-13b3b50b47aa.html

¹³ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/leonard-steinhorn/college-student-election-holiday_b_1082188.html

¹⁴ https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pvVtnGXOueFfE_N3kS4fgN14j8Yoq4dBbac2Ro_DOKs/edit

¹⁵<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2018/10/26/election-day-holiday-vote-party-celebrate-democracy-column/1722608002/>
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SUGGESTED STRUCTURE OF ELECTION DAY

UC Berkeley, as a campus known for its political activism and student civic engagement, should continue its leadership in this realm by making future Election Days non-instructional days on campus. The statement we have included in this proposal details the cruciality of giving greater significance to Election Day in the form of making it a non-instructional day for students in order to set a proper foundation of civic engagement. On this day, no classes will occur, but the mandate would not interfere with nor prohibit any other campus activities, occurrences, or events. The fall semester traditionally starts on the 4th Wednesday of August. We would propose that it start on the 4th Tuesday during an election year fall semester to account for the lost day of classes resulting from making Election Day a non-instructional day. To ensure this change, we will work closely with the UC Regents and state legislature, both of to whom the ASUC Office of the External Affairs Vice President has close ties.

CONCLUSION

For the reasons listed above, the Vote Coalition and the Office of the External Affairs Vice President of the Associated Students of the University of California implore the Academic Senate to make Election Day (starting in 2020) a non-instructional day for students at UC Berkeley. Not only would making Election Day a non-instructional day increase voter turnout for students who are normally overburdened with classes, midterms, extracurricular activities, and jobs by alleviating the stress of scheduling around classes and midterms, this change would propel a spirit of civic engagement among students in greater recognition of how voting on Election Day is a keystone of our democracy. When students do not have to worry about finding enough time to vote on Election Day, they are both more apt to vote and better informed about the voting process.