



Start Fall Semester One Day Early for Election Day Holiday

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PROPOSAL: Fall semester starts one day early, removing a dedicated day for regular non-first year registration, like how Spring semester currently is, to offer Election Day as a Institute Holiday on even-years (for midterm and Presidential federal elections).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Various students and student groups have expressed support for making Election Day a Student (or Institute) Holiday over time, citing the need to reduce academic and professional obstacles for students, staff, and faculty to vote; the symbolic value of MIT supporting civic engagement and democracy; and student life benefits of having an additional holiday mid-semester. After meeting with relevant MIT admin and collecting information from past advocacy efforts, we believe that the most feasible and practical option for implementing an Election Day Holiday is to start each Fall semester early by one day. [A recent UA Public Affairs survey](#) shows that **undergraduate student support for the proposal is above 90%**. Since this day is currently reserved as Registration Day, registration for most non-first year students would have to change to be more similar to how Spring registration already currently is. Some schedules for pre-semester events (e.g. at the department and residential level) may be affected as well. Besides starting one day earlier and getting Election Day—the Tuesday within November 2 to November 8— as an Institute Holiday, the rest of the Fall semester's schedule would remain unchanged.

BACKGROUND & DISCUSSION:

Status Quo

The first week of Fall semester is currently organized as follows: Labor Day is on Monday, non-first year registration is on Tuesday, then the first day of classes is on Wednesday.

Currently, faculty are encouraged to be flexible in their classes as they see fit on Election Day, but by no means is it required. Although many faculty offer flexibility, mandatory attendance may still be enforced, lectures do not have to be recorded, and major assignments (midterms, projects, presentations, essays) can still be due on Election Day.

Other Considered Policy Options

There were a few other original suggestions to get an Election Day Holiday, but each of them had significant drawbacks that made them either infeasible or impractical:

1) Add an Institute/Student Holiday. 65 teaching days (13 calendar weeks of 5 classes per week) is the “norm,” and is achieved 5 out of 7 years (63 in the remaining two cycles). Generally, faculty push back against the deletion of existing teaching days (“in AAU Registrar surveys, MIT has consistently reported the lowest number of class days in the Fall term”), and for this reason we determined this suggestion extremely unlikely to gain the necessary support among faculty.

2) Remove the Student Holiday After Indigenous People’s Day. This proposal would avoid deleting existing teaching days (as Election Day and the Day after Indigenous People’s Day both fall on a Tuesday), which makes it feasible. However, as stated by the Registrar:

The Indigenous People’s Day (IDP) student holiday occurs in 4 out of 7 years. In one year it shifts to the Monday before Veterans’ Day when Veterans’ Day is on a Tuesday. In another year it is absent altogether and in one year it is a switch day with a Monday schedule of classes. Another twist – the calendar does not consistently pass from “Year 1” to “Year 7” sequentially. Every four years one of the calendar cycle years is skipped due to leap year [...] Which results in the fact that the IDP holiday does not always fall within an even year. So this alternative would not consistently add an extra day.

In other words, since the day after Indigenous People’s Day is not offered every year, and is not consistent in scheduling, this policy change would mean Election Day Holiday is not offered consistently— eventually, there will be Presidential or Midterm elections not offered as a Holiday with this policy change, making it, to a degree, impractical.

3) Remove Career Fair Student Holiday. The Student Career Fair falls on a Friday, but Election Day is a Tuesday. The academic calendar tries to maintain a balance between the number of class days on the Monday/Wednesday schedule and Tuesday/Thursday schedule, with the Registrar writing:

In terms of balancing, in 5 out of 7 years there is a 1-day difference between MW and TR with MW having 1 extra day. In the other 2 years that difference increases to 2 days. Eliminating a Tuesday exacerbates this and taking the Friday back does nothing to remedy it. So [...] there will need to be a switch day on a Monday or Wednesday which proves confusing if it doesn't happen consistently as it does in Spring. And, of course, there are the 2 years when there is no career day.

Once again, the issue of this holiday not existing consistently means it would not be a practical solution for offering a holiday every Election Day. There is the additional complication of needing a switch day, which could make faculty more likely to oppose such a change as well.

4) Starting the Semester Before Labor Day. This option was proposed as a way to have the semester end earlier, in addition to getting Election Day as a Holiday. The MIT Fall semester cannot start before Labor Day, though, since most Massachusetts primary and secondary schools begin at or around the same time— MIT starting a week early would mean faculty with children would have to start working before their children do. Of course, there would be countless additional disruptions such a change would have, and for these reasons, we do not think starting the semester before Labor Day would be feasible.

5) Ending the Semester One Day Later. Since this change would be for the Fall semester, we determined that ending the semester one day later would be too disruptive as it would push the semester to end even closer to Christmas than it already is. We believe this change would put a significant financial burden on students' winter travel, and rush the time students can spend with friends and families during the holiday season.

However, eliminating Fall Registration Day, in the words of the Registrar, “would likely be a cultural [not logistical] decision at MIT.” Since starting the day after Labor Day would add an additional Tuesday to the academic calendar, there would be no need for switch days or other alterations to the calendar to add Election Day as a Holiday.

We believe it would be most practical to have an Election Day Holiday during the federal election cycles, therefore on even-years for the midterm and Presidential elections.

Even as students, we fully recognize the importance of increasing voter turnout among all eligible voters, and we would like this policy change to affect everyone part of the MIT community, not just students. That is why we would like to see the Election Day Holiday being an Institute Holiday over Student Holiday.

Importance of Adding the Election Day Holiday

Making Election Day a holiday would demonstrate that civic engagement and participation are values of MIT. This would be in-line with former President Reif's commitment to student voting through the ALL IN challenge. MIT should use its influence to not only underscore the importance of voting in general, but also to empower college students who are [facing all-time high levels of voter suppression](#), including adding restrictions on early voting, mail-in voting, student IDs for voting, and the closures of university polling places.

We believe that MIT students offer particularly valuable perspectives, and we would like to make every reasonable effort to encourage them to civically participate, thus forming early habits that can be carried on to subsequent elections. Many MIT students contribute to technical issues of great political importance, but we must emphasize the importance of policy and civic engagement to see that work translated into another avenue of impact.

An Election Day Holiday could also integrate MIT students with the Cambridge and Boston communities. This would come in the forms of some students choosing to participate in Cambridge and Boston local elections, but also volunteering at polling sites, and participating in broader voter engagement efforts in the community— for example, by helping with voter assistance hotlines, driving people to the polls, knocking on doors to turn out other voters, or other community-wide events celebrating and encouraging civic engagement.

There is reason to believe an Election Day Holiday would increase voter turnout among students, for both undergraduate and graduate students. Many MIT students have tightly packed academic schedules, heavy coursework, and other obligations, and it takes a decent chunk of time to vote, whether in-person or mail-in: Researching each candidate and proposition, filling out the mail-in ballot, waiting in line to vote-in person, and traveling to mail ballots, get stamps, or go to the polling station all take non-trivial amounts of time for busy students.

Even for those mailing in an absentee ballot (i.e., those not registered to vote in the state of Massachusetts), offering Election Day holiday would provide enough flexibility to allow many more MIT students to vote in their home states. There are 21 states which allow absentee ballots to be postmarked by Election Day.¹ Using the [geographic distribution](#) information from the Registrar, **67.4% (2782) of the total 4127 current MIT undergraduates who reside in the US live in one of these states and would thus be able to submit a valid ballot via mail on Election Day.**

Additionally, having a day dedicated to Election Day can serve as a psychological nudge to remind students to vote. We therefore believe that instituting an Election Day Holiday would mean the difference of voting or not for many students.

Numerous peer-reviewed studies have indicated that establishing Election Day as a holiday could increase voter turnout. Nearly half (47%) of eligible voters surveyed in a Tufts Center for Information and Research on [Civic Learning & Engagement \(CIRCLE\) report](#) on barriers to student voting said **obligations such as schoolwork or a job prevented them from casting a ballot.** Although non-students cited issues with transportation, polling place lines, and inconvenient polling places as additional barriers to voting, their student counterparts were more likely to select academic and extracurricular obligations as a common reason for not voting. Indeed, this aligns with the results of our survey, with many MIT undergraduates reporting that an Election Day Holiday would make them more likely to vote, citing time as a key constraint to voting.

Furthermore, we believe there could be downstream, multiplier effects of MIT instituting an Election Day Holiday. It could inspire or pressure other universities— and their student body governments— to implement their own Election Day Holiday. People who receive Election Day off as students may also take with them this expectation as they enter the labor market, which could have ripple effects for community civic engagement in the long-term as students begin to fill managerial positions.

¹ These states are as follows: Alaska, California, DC, Illinois, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Puerto Rico, Texas, Utah, US Virgin Islands, Virginia, Washington, and West Virginia. (Source: National Conference of State Legislatures)

Costs and Identified Barriers of Removing Registration Day

We have identified some tradeoffs and potential barriers to implementing this academic calendar change:

1) Starting one day earlier could complicate scheduling for academic

advisors and students. We leave it for the advisors to adapt to this academic calendar change at their discretion. Due to MIT's decentralized nature of advising, data does not exist on what percentage of non-first year students' registration occurs after in-person meetings with their advisor; however, we do know that over 50% (53.4%) of non-first year Fall registrations are approved by academic advisors on Registration Day itself.

2) Most Non-GIR Advanced Standing Exams (ASEs) are scheduled for Registration Day.

We point out that all ASEs that fulfill General Institute Requirements (GIRs; 18.01/2, 8.01/2, 5.111, 7.012) and 6.100A are offered online over the summer. This leaves the 5.12, 8.03/4, and 18.03/6 ASEs schedules impacted, since ASEs in other subjects are rarely given. We leave it for each department to adapt to this academic calendar change at their discretion. Departments may consider holding these exams in-person at another time before the semester starts, say, the Friday preceding the start of classes, when residential move-in begins for non-first year students; virtually before the Fall semester, as 6.100A decided to change this year; in-person at another time after the semester starts, say, the Friday of the first week of class; or only administering these exams during the Fall final examination period, but encourage professors teaching Fall classes that have the ASE classes as a prerequisite to grant permission to prospective students case-by-case. For this last point, we are unable to determine how many students this change would affect, as we do not have the data on how many students take the non-GIR ASEs and immediately use them for prerequisites.

3) Some schedules for pre-semester events (e.g. at the department level) may be affected. We are unable to determine how many departments this change would affect, due to their decentralized nature.

4) Members of Panhel have expressed concern over how this proposal will affect their recruitment process, which ends on the current Registration Tuesday. It is worth noting, however, that members of Panhel are not unanimous in their opinions. Of the sixty written comments received in our survey, five mention sorority recruitment— two of which say the change is “worth it.”

5) Some students have indicated that they would prefer to not have the academic calendar change, since it removes one day of the Summer. Overall, the sentiment of these students is that voting is easy enough for college students already, so it does not warrant the extra costs of changing the academic calendar.

Although having the day after Labor Day off is valuable, most students would much prefer to have their effective Summer break cut by one day in exchange for a day off in the middle of the Fall semester, when the value of breaks becomes considerably higher as the semester is far more busy. **Overall student support for the proposal is overwhelming: With over 10% of the student body surveyed, over 90% of respondents support the academic calendar change.**

For these reasons, it is our view that these benefits outlined strongly outweigh the costs of removing Registration Day, and therefore endorse the proposal to start the Fall semester one day early to offer Election Day as an Institute Holiday for even years (for midterm and Presidential elections).