

Joint Resolution to Make Election Day a University Holiday (i.e. “Democracy Day”)

We, the fourteen undersigned undergraduate and graduate student government bodies across Harvard, call on the administration to designate Election Day a University holiday (“Democracy Day”) for all U.S. federal elections beginning in 2022.

Designating Election Day a University holiday (1) provides a tremendous opportunity to elevate the importance of civic participation as a Harvard community; (2) would free students, staff, and faculty alike of institutional barriers that discourage voting and election-day volunteering; and (3) would enable a Democracy Day of community learning through institutional programming focused on civic engagement.

Holidays serve as an expression of an institution’s values, priorities, and commitments. Designating Election Day a University holiday would be consistent with Harvard’s mission of “educating the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society,”¹ and aligns with President Larry Bacow’s 2020 Convocation proclamation that voting is “the first responsibility of citizenship in a democracy.”² Moreover, Harvard’s commitment to achieving 100% eligible voter registration, engagement, and turnout³ requires an instruction-free day focused on civic engagement.

Beyond elevating the importance of civic engagement as part of our University’s values, an instruction-free Democracy Day would free Harvard students and staff of institutional barriers that discourage civic engagement. Less than half of eligible Harvard students voted in the 2018 election,⁴ while countless others in 2020 were unable to serve as much-needed poll workers or Election Day volunteers. By eliminating classes for students and work commitments for staff (including our dining, janitorial, and facilities staff), we can better create a civic culture for the *entire* Harvard community.

This University holiday—Democracy Day—would be a day of fun, celebration, and reflection on democratic citizenship. Robust programming would be offered to encourage student participation in community service and dialogue about democracy broadly, and the day would be inclusive of all Harvard community members, regardless of citizenship or voting eligibility. For example, this Democracy Day would enable students to serve as poll workers, work as volunteers with local community non-profits, join get-out-the-vote efforts, and attend educational panels discussing

¹ Harvard College Mission (“The mission of Harvard College is to educate the citizens and citizen-leaders for our society.”)

² 2020 Convocation Remarks by President Bacow (“For those of you who are eligible to vote in the upcoming elections, I will now give you your first homework assignment: register to vote, inform yourself of the candidates and the issues, and cast a ballot. It’s the first responsibility of citizenship in a democracy, and at Harvard we take this responsibility very seriously.”)

³ Harvard Votes Challenge Pledge to 100% (“The Harvard Votes Challenge’s goal is to reach 100% eligible voter registration, engagement, and turnout across the University.”)

⁴ Turnout for voting-eligible Harvard students by election year: 2014 (22%), 2016 (58%), 2018 (49%).

the importance of democracy domestically and internationally. A more complete outline of the day can be found in our proposal to Dean Khurana.⁵

Other schools—Brown University, Columbia University, and several others⁶—have already designated Election Day a University holiday, demonstrating that it is administratively feasible. Harvard possesses the resources, leadership, and commitment to successfully implement Democracy Day.

In order to elevate and celebrate civic participation, remove institutional barriers, and educate citizens and citizen leaders, we therefore call on Harvard to make Election Day a University holiday.

APPENDIX: List of Supportive Student Governments

Harvard Undergraduate Council (*Unanimous*)
Harvard Graduate Council (*Unanimous*)
Harvard Divinity School Student Association Council
Harvard School of Dental Medicine Student Council
Harvard Law School Student Government
Harvard Chan Student Association
Harvard Business School Student Association
Harvard Kennedy School Student Government
Harvard Graduate School of Arts and Sciences Student Council
Harvard John A. Paulson School Of Engineering & Applied Sciences Graduate Council
Harvard Extension Student Association
Harvard Medical School Student Council
Harvard Graduate School of Design Student Forum
Harvard Graduate School of Education Student Council

⁵ Democracy Day Concept Paper

⁶ The following schools have all designated Election Day a holiday: Brown University, Columbia University, George Washington University, American University, Augsburg University, Wayne State University, Lesley University, Suffolk University, Stanford Law School, UC Berkeley Law, and Loyola Law School.