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Federal holidays in the United States

In the United States, a federal holiday is an authorized holiday which has been recognized by the US government. Every year on a U.S. federal holiday, non-essential federal government offices are closed, and every federal employee is paid for the holiday. Private-sector employees required to work on a legal holiday may receive holiday pay in addition to their ordinary wages.

Federal holidays are designated by the United States Congress in Title V of the United States Code (5 U.S.C. § 6103 (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/5/6103>)).^[1] Congress has authority to create holidays only for federal institutions (including federally owned properties) and employees, and for the District of Columbia. However, as a general rule other institutions, including banks, post offices, and schools, may be closed on those days. In various parts of the country, state and city holidays may be observed in addition to the federal holidays.

Contents

History

The history of federal holidays in the United States dates back to June 28, 1870, when Congress created federal holidays "to correspond with similar laws of States around the District ... and ... in every State of the Union."^[2] Although at first applicable only to federal employees in the District of Columbia, Congress extended coverage in 1885 to all federal employees.

The original four holidays were:

- New Year's Day
- Independence Day
- Thanksgiving Day
- Christmas Day

George Washington's Birthday became a Federal holiday in 1880. In 1888 and 1894, respectively, Decoration Day (now Memorial Day) and Labor Day were created. In 1938, Armistice Day (now Veterans Day) was created to mark the end of World War I. The scope and the name of the holiday was expanded in 1954 to honor Americans who fought in World War II and the Korean War.

In 1968, the Monday Holiday Act of 1968 shifted several holidays to always fall on a Monday and saw the establishment of Columbus Day.

Federal holidays in the United States



Public • Federal • Observance • School
• Hallmark

Observed by Federal government

Type National

Observances

- New Year's Day
- Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Washington's Birthday
- Memorial Day
- Independence Day
- Labor Day
- Columbus Day
- Veterans Day
- Thanksgiving Day
- Christmas Day

In 1983, the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. became the nation's most recently established holiday.^[3]

List of federal holidays

Most of the ten^[4] U.S. federal holidays are also state holidays. A holiday that falls on a weekend is usually observed on the closest weekday (e.g. a holiday falling on a Saturday is observed on the preceding Friday, while a holiday falling on a Sunday is observed on the succeeding Monday).^[5] The official names came from the laws that define holidays for federal employees.

Date	Official Name	Details
January 1 (Fixed)	<u>New Year's Day</u> ^[1]	Celebrates beginning of the <u>Gregorian calendar year</u> . Festivities include counting down to 12:00 midnight on the preceding night, <u>New Year's Eve</u> , often with fireworks display and party. The <u>ball drop at Times Square in New York City</u> has become a national New Year's festivity. Traditional end of <u>Christmas</u> and holiday season. ^[6]
January 15–21 (Floating Monday)	<u>Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.</u>	Honors <u>Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.</u> , <u>civil rights leader</u> , who was actually born on January 15, 1929; combined with other holidays in several states. Some cities and municipalities hold parades; and more recently, the 1994 King Holiday and Service Act, which was passed to encourage Americans to transform the King Holiday into a day of citizen action volunteer service, has gained in popularity (sometimes referred to as a National Day of Service).
February 15–21 (Floating Monday)	<u>Washington's Birthday</u>	Washington's Birthday was first declared a federal holiday by an 1879 act of Congress. The <u>Uniform Holidays Act, 1968</u> , shifted the date of the commemoration of <u>Washington's Birthday</u> from February 22 to the third Monday in February (between February 15 and 21, meaning the observed holiday never falls on Washington's actual birthday). Because of this, combined with the fact that President <u>Lincoln's birthday</u> falls on February 12, many people now refer to this holiday as " <u>Presidents' Day</u> " and consider it a day honoring all American presidents. However, neither the Uniform Holidays Act nor any subsequent law changed the name of the holiday from <u>Washington's Birthday</u> to <u>Presidents' Day</u> . ^[1]
May 25–31 (Floating Monday)	<u>Memorial Day</u>	Honors the nation's war dead from the <u>Civil War</u> onwards; marks the unofficial beginning of the summer season. (traditionally May 30, shifted by the <u>Uniform Holidays Act 1968</u>). The holiday is observed on the last Monday in May.
July 4 (Fixed)	<u>Independence Day</u>	Celebrates the signing of the <u>Declaration of Independence</u> from British rule, also called the Fourth of July. Fireworks celebrations are held in many cities throughout the nation.
September 1–7 (Floating Monday)	<u>Labor Day</u>	One 2012 survey of American adults found that 52% celebrate Labor Day as the unofficial end of summer. ^[7] A separate nationwide survey of human resource professionals, conducted in 2015, found 41% of employers require at least some employees to work on the holiday. ^[8] The holiday is observed on the first Monday in September.
October 8–14 (Floating Monday)	<u>Columbus Day</u>	Honors <u>Christopher Columbus</u> , an explorer of the Americas. In some areas it is also a celebration of <u>Indigenous Peoples</u> , or <u>Italian culture and heritage</u> . (traditionally October 12)
November 11 (Fixed)	<u>Veterans Day</u>	Honors all veterans of the <u>United States armed forces</u> . It is observed on November 11 to recall the end of <u>World War I</u> on that date in 1918 (major hostilities of World War I were formally ended at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918 when the <u>Armistice with Germany</u> went into effect).
November 22–28 (Floating Thursday)	<u>Thanksgiving Day</u>	Traditionally celebrates the giving of thanks for the autumn harvest. Traditionally includes the sharing of a <u>turkey dinner</u> . The holiday is observed on the fourth Thursday in November.
December 25 (Fixed)	<u>Christmas Day</u>	The most widely celebrated holiday of the Christian year, Christmas is observed as a commemoration of the birth of <u>Jesus of Nazareth</u> . Commonly celebrated by Christians and non-Christians alike with various traditions.

New Year's Day, Independence Day, Veterans Day, and Christmas Day are observed on the same calendar date each year. Holidays that fall on a Saturday are observed by federal employees who work a standard Monday to Friday week on the previous Friday. Federal employees who work on Saturday will observe the holiday on Saturday; Friday will be a regular work day. Holidays that fall on a Sunday are observed by federal workers the following Monday. The other holidays always fall on a particular day of the week.^[5]

Although many states recognize most or all federal holidays as state holidays, the Federal government cannot enact laws to compel them to do so. Furthermore, states can recognize other days as state holidays that are not federal holidays. For example, the State of Texas recognizes all federal holidays except Columbus Day, and in addition recognizes the Friday after Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, and the day after Christmas as state holidays.^[9] Furthermore, Texas does not follow the federal rule of closing either the Friday before if a holiday falls on a Saturday, or the Monday after if a holiday falls on a Sunday (offices are open on those Fridays or Mondays), but does have "partial staffing holidays" (such as March 2, which is Texas Independence Day) and "optional holidays" (such as Good Friday).^[9]

Private employers also cannot be required to observe federal or state holidays, the key exception being federally chartered banks. Some private employers, often by a union contract, pay a differential such as time-and-a-half or double-time to employees who work on some federal holidays. However, most non-unionized private sector employees only receive their standard pay for working on a federal holiday if it is not a designated holiday at their company.

Former federal holidays

Date	Official Name	Details
January 8	<u>The Eighth</u>	Celebrated the U.S. victory in the <u>Battle of New Orleans</u> . Was in place 1828 to 1861.
September 2	<u>Victory Day</u>	Celebrated the U.S. victory against Japan in the conclusion of <u>World War II</u> . Was in place 1948 to 1975.

Over the course of U.S. history, federal holidays were created and then abolished over time as their significance waned. Two holidays, the Eighth and Victory Day, were once celebrated. Between 1828 and 1861, "The Eighth" was a holiday that marked the U.S. victory in the Battle of New Orleans on January 8, 1815, with Tennessee's Andrew Jackson leading a successful battle against regular British soldiers and freed slaves. Following Jackson's election as President, the day earned official national recognition. The Eighth continued as an official national holiday from 1828 until the advent of the Civil War.^[10] Victory Day marked the "Victory over Japan" and remained a national holiday until 1975. While both holidays remain largely forgotten by the American public, the U.S. state of Rhode Island still officially observes Victory Day, with public offices and schools being closed.^[11]

Legal holidays due to presidential proclamation

Federal law also provides for the declaration of other public holidays by the President of the United States. Generally the president will provide a reasoning behind the elevation of the day, and call on the people of the United States to observe the day "with appropriate ceremonies and activities." Examples of presidentially declared holidays were the days of the funerals for former Presidents Ronald Reagan and Gerald Ford; federal government offices were closed and employees given a paid holiday.

Controversy and criticism

Martin Luther King Jr. Day

Some individuals and organizations have objected to the federal status of certain holidays, such as Martin Luther King Jr. Day and Columbus Day. In particular, Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina opposed the creation of the federal holiday for the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. in 1983.^[12]

Columbus Day

Protests by the Native American community support the abolition of Columbus Day, mainly due to its ideology in forcefully conquering and converting whole populations with another and encouraging imperialism and colonization.^[13] Glenn Morris of the Denver Post wrote that Columbus Day "... is not merely a celebration of Columbus the man; it is the celebration of a racist legal and political legacy - embedded in official legal and political pronouncements of the U.S. - such as the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny."^[14]

Hawaii, Alaska, Oregon, and South Dakota are U.S. states that do not recognize Columbus Day at all, though Hawaii and South Dakota mark the day with an alternative holiday or observance. South Dakota is the only state to recognize Native American Day as an alternate. Hawaii recognizes Discoverer's Day.

Christmas Day

Christmas Day as a federal or public holiday is also sometimes objected to by various sources,^{[15][16][17]} usually due to its ties with the Christian religion. In December 1999, the U.S. District Court, in the case *Ganulin vs. United States*, denied the charge that Christmas Day's federal status violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, ruling that "the Christmas holiday has become largely secularized", and that "by giving federal employees a paid vacation day on Christmas, the government is doing no more than recognizing the cultural significance of the holiday".^{[18][19]}

Proposed federal holidays

Many proposed federal holidays have come up over time. According to an article from CBS, federal holidays are generally "expensive" and they only allow federal workers to take the day off. As the U.S. federal government is a large employer, the holidays are expensive. If a holiday is controversial, opposition will generally prevent bills enacting them from passing. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, for example, was one that took much effort to pass. And once it did pass, it took more effort for all states to eventually recognize it.^[20]

The following list is an example of holidays that have been proposed and have reasons why they are not observed at the federal level today. Some of these holidays are observed at the state level.

Date	Official Name	Details
February 15-21 (Floating Monday)	<u>Susan B. Anthony Day</u>	The holiday was proposed by <u>Carolyn Maloney</u> in H.R. 655 on February 11, 2011. ^[21] It falls on the same day as Washington's Birthday.
March 25-31 (Floating Monday)	<u>Cesar Chavez Day</u>	The holiday was proposed by California Democrat <u>Joe Baca</u> in H.R. 76 and was further endorsed by President <u>Barack Obama</u> . ^[22]
May 15-21 (Floating Monday)	<u>Malcolm X Day</u>	The holiday was proposed in H.R. 323 in 1993 and 1994 by Congressman <u>Charles Rangel</u> . ^[23]
June 14	<u>Flag Day</u>	Proposed several times, but only to become a national observance when President <u>Harry Truman</u> signed it into law as such. ^[24]
September 15-21 (Floating Monday)	<u>Native Americans' Day</u>	The holiday was petitioned for multiple times and was introduced into Congress multiple times, but was unsuccessful. The proclamation exists today as the "Native American Awareness Week." ^[25]
November 2-8 (Floating Tuesday)	<u>Election Day / Democracy Day</u>	There have been multiple movements for this holiday to be official, with the last happening in with the " <u>1993 Motor Voter Act</u> ", mainly to boost voter turnout. ^[26]

See also

- [List of observances in the United States by presidential proclamation](#)
- [Public holidays in the United States](#)

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External links

- **Federal Holidays: Evolution and Application** (https://www.senate.gov/reference/resources/pdf/Federal_Holidays.pdf), CRS Report for Congress, 98-301 GOV, updated February 8, 1999, by Stephen W. Stathis
 - **United States Code: Federal Holidays (5 USC 6103)** (<https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/05/6103->)
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