



How Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday became a holiday

The fight to make Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday a holiday took 32 years, a lot of campaigning, and guest appearances including Stevie Wonder, Ted Kennedy, and the National Football League.

Officially, Dr. King's birthday was approved as a federal holiday in 1983. By 2000, all 50 states recognized the King birthday as a government holiday. It wasn't an easy task for holiday supporters, who had to push hard in Congress to get the federal holiday created. A second battle took place to get individual states to also recognize the holiday, with often emotional disagreements.



Representative John Conyers introduced the first motion to make Dr. King's birthday a federal holiday in 1968, just four days after Dr. King's assassination in Memphis. It took another 11 years to the federal holiday to come up for a vote on the House of Representative's floor in 1979. The bill needed a two-thirds majority to pass, but it fell five votes short with a 252-133 count. The holiday's supporters regrouped and intensified their efforts. Musician Stevie Wonder helped in 1981 by releasing the song "Happy Birthday" to promote the holiday.

Holiday supporters organized a march on Washington that included an estimated 500,000 people. Coretta Scott King, along with Stevie Wonder, presented a petition signed by 6 million people to House leader Tip O'Neill. The House took up the bill in 1983 and it passed by 53 votes. President Ronald Reagan signed the bill in November 1983. The first federal King holiday was celebrated in 1986. It took longer for the 50 states to adopt the holiday; each state government decides if it will observe the holiday. By 1986, 17 states had already adopted it. But there was strong resistance in Arizona to passing a state holiday. At that point, entertainers had started boycotting the state in protest, and the National Football League moved the Super Bowl from Tempe, Arizona to Southern California. Finally, Arizona voters approved the King holiday two years later.

Congress has the power to declare something a federal holiday. The government is a huge employer, and all a holiday officially does is give those workers the day off. The same, however, can't be said for the workers of private companies; the government can't dictate the days on which they do business. That's why, essentially, there are so few federal holidays. They are very expensive for the government. But that doesn't keep lawmakers from proposing them. Over the years, more than 1,100 different proposals for federal holidays have been given. Some congressmen want Native Americans' Day, others proposed Susan B. Anthony Day. Making Election Day a holiday is an idea many think would get more of us to vote.