

Springing forward to daylight saving time is obsolete, confusing and unhealthy, critics say

The annual time change is under legislative challenge in states and in Congress.

By **Joel Achenbach**

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This weekend, Americans will once again navigate their complex relationship with the chronically confusing and arguably misnamed daylight saving time. In most of the United States, the clocks spring forward early Sunday when 2 a.m. suddenly becomes 3 a.m. People are advised to avoid scheduling anything important for 2:30 a.m. Sunday, since, by law, such a moment does not exist.

But the law may change. The national policy of switching from standard time to daylight saving time and back again is under legislative challenge from coast to coast. Multiple initiatives in Congress and in statehouses would terminate our current system of time toggling — a system that started a century ago and has been controversial ever since.

It's not really daylight saving time that's drawing fire: It's standard time. Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) on Wednesday reintroduced a bill to make daylight saving time a year-round reality across the country, with no more biannual time changes. Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-Fla.) introduced matching legislation in the House. The moves come in the wake of a vote in the Florida legislature last year to adopt daylight saving time year-round.

If the Sunshine Protection Act became law, it would essentially end daylight saving time by making it the new, permanent, immutable standard time. (Just to be clear: Astronomically, nothing is new under the sun. The sun will remain a star, radiating light, and Earth will continue to orbit the sun while spinning on an axis. The amount of sunshine will remain the same.)

There are two issues here. One is whether changing the clock is inherently a bad idea, because of sleep disruption, negative health effects and the general confusion generated by a jumpy time system. The other issue is whether we need to favor the evening over the morning when trying to distribute our sunlight — not just during spring and summer and early fall but throughout the year.

Researchers have published a variety of studies that question the wisdom of changing the clock. A 2016 study found evidence that the switch back to standard time in the fall is associated with a spike in diagnoses of depression, for example. A study published in Europe in 2018 found a “modest” increase in heart attacks after the clocks change, with the effect more pronounced during the springtime shift. Certainly the time change can disrupt our sleep cycles, particularly in the spring, research shows.

Rubio and other advocates for year-round DST say it promotes public safety. A 2015 report published in the Review of Economics and Statistics found that extra daylight in the evening after the switch to DST led to a drop in crime that was not offset by increased crime during the darker morning hours. “[R]obbery rates didn’t increase in the morning, even though those hours were darker — apparently, criminals aren’t early risers,” researchers Jennifer Doleac and Nicholas Sanders wrote in a Brookings Institution article.

“Studies have shown many benefits of a year-round Daylight Saving Time, which is why Florida’s legislature overwhelmingly voted to make it permanent last year. Reflecting the will of the State of Florida, I’m proud to reintroduce this bill to make Daylight Saving Time permanent nationally,” Rubio said in a statement.

California voters overwhelmingly approved a similar proposition in November. State Assembly member Kansen Chu (D), who represents San Jose and other communities in the heart of Silicon Valley, has introduced year-round DST legislation that is making its way through two committees.

Chu said he became interested in the time change issue when he heard about health risks associated with moving the clocks forward and back. He predicts his bill will easily pass both houses of the state legislature, but he believes Congress needs to lead the way to ensure that state action won't run afoul of federal law.

"I guess it's all depending on how fast the people on Capitol Hill can move on this issue. I know they have a lot of more important headaches," Chu told The Washington Post.

Business interests have long supported the later daylight, he said. For example, the golf industry and the barbecue industry have been big promoters.

There's one massive objection to the idea of year-round DST: The already dark, cold mornings of fall and winter under standard time would become even darker and colder, and potentially dangerous for kids walking to the bus stop or to school. "National PTA is opposed to daylight saving time during the winter months because of the safety factor," said Heidi May Wilson, spokeswoman for the National Parent Teacher Association.

Daylight saving time was first implemented by Germany during World War I and was soon adopted in the United States. But it was always controversial, particularly among farmers, who liked early morning daylight in the summer. It became a cultural conflict between agrarian and metropolitan interests, said Michael Downing, an English professor at Tufts University and author of "Spring Forward: The Annual Madness of Daylight Saving Time."

DST was implemented haphazardly for decades, until Congress passed the Uniform Time Act in 1966 to bring some order to the system. Some states and territories opted out, however. Arizona, Hawaii, Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands are among the places that still reject DST. Congress has extended the duration of DST twice, and it now covers two-thirds of the year. Since 2007, DST has begun on the second Sunday in March and ended on the first Sunday in November.

Critics say DST is an artifact of a different era. One of the purported virtues of the switch has been that it saves energy. But there's no evidence that, in the modern world, shoving daylight into the evening hours saves significant amounts of energy, said Matthew Kotchen, a Yale professor of economics who co-wrote a study on energy usage in Indiana before and after the state adopted DST. Lighting is far more efficient now, he said. **Moreover, when the sun remains in the sky into the "evening" hours, homes remain warmer and people are more likely to keep their air conditioners running.** Heating and cooling are much bigger factors than lighting when it comes to energy consumption, he said.

"There may be a lot of reasons why we want daylight saving time and why we don't, but the only thing I can say for sure is that **daylight saving time should not be part of the Energy Policy Act,**" Kotchen said.

A stylebook note: It's not "*daylight savings time*." That's imprecise speech. Also, while we're at it: Daylight saving time does not really save daylight. It should be called daylight shifting time.

"There continues to be the mythic idea that we are saving something by turning our clocks forward and backward," Downing said. "It's such a preposterous idea that we can gain or lose an hour by simply sticking our finger in the face of our clocks."

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