

Daylight Saving Time: Why Does It Exist? (It's Not for Farming)

By Daniel Victor

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(This article has been updated.)

We spring forward, and then fall back.

But why?

The reason the United States and many other countries, mostly in the West, shift to daylight saving time is contentious and confusing, and some of the more popular explanations are not grounded in reality. (It isn't for farmers, as you may have learned in school.)

In 2017, the ritual will take place on Sunday, when Americans will push their clocks forward an hour. The general concept is to move an hour of sunlight from the early morning, when many would sleep through it, to the evening, when you could most likely do more with the light.

"For most people, an extra hour of daylight in the evening after work or after school is much more usable than the hour of daylight in the morning," said David Prerau, the author of "Seize the Daylight."

But since the idea was put in place, it has faced detractors and debate. Several states, including California and Rhode Island, are considering abolishing the practice. As with many other congressional acts, it's worth considering who the beneficiaries are.

Who Profits?

Extra daylight means extra time to spend money.

And if you're in the United States, you're probably going to get in your car to go spend that money.

"Americans really do leave their homes when there is more sunlight at the end of the day," said Michael Downing, a lecturer at Tufts University and the author of "Spring Forward: The Annual Madness of Daylight Saving Time."

"We go to the parks, and we go to the mall, but we don't walk there," he said. "**Daylight saving increases gasoline consumption.**"

No one is more aware of that than gas stations, which is why **the Association for Convenience and Fuel Retailing, a lobbying group for convenience stores**, has pushed to start daylight saving time earlier in the year. In 2010, Jeff Miller, the group's chairman at the time, said the industry had **added an estimated \$1 billion in annual sales since the organization lobbied to add a month to daylight saving in 1986.**

"That's tens of billions of dollars in sales since then," he said in a news release.

Those in the leisure industry have also benefited, Mr. Downing said. For example, he said, **the Chamber of Commerce** has lobbied on behalf of retailers that sell gardening, home repair or sports equipment. **Lobbyists from the golf industry estimated in 1986 that an extra month of daylight saving would be worth \$200 million to \$400 million.**

Before lights were installed in professional stadiums, Major League Baseball had to end some games in ties because of darkness, and fans often felt robbed by such dissatisfying endings. In the two seasons after daylight saving began, the number of ties decreased to five from 22.

Who's Opposed?

It might be surprising to find farmers in this category considering the common belief that they are the reason for daylight saving time.

"I don't know how that ever became a myth, but it is the exact opposite," Mr. Prerau said. He said daylight saving time actually disrupts farmers' schedules.

Initially, **farmers** were the strongest lobby against the change. But since then, opposition has fragmented into much smaller interest groups, Mr. Downing said, including **religious groups that schedule prayers around sunrise**. **Parents have also complained about having their children walk to school in the dark.**

Some have argued it leads to an increase in traffic accidents. Mayor Bill de Blasio of New York warned drivers to be vigilant, calling the morning commute that will now be darker "a serious danger."

And some anti-federalists are opposed to what they consider unnecessary government intervention. (Arizona and Hawaii are the only two states that have held out.)

Energy Savings

The idea was originally rooted in saving candle wax, not electricity.

Historians have traced the notion back to Benjamin Franklin, who realized he was sleeping through some daylight hours while visiting Paris in the 18th century. He suggested French officials shoot cannons at sunrise to jolt people out of bed, optimizing the amount of hours they spent awake when it's light out. That way, they could cut down on using candles to light their homes while awake, Mr. Prerau said.

But the first idea to move the clock hands came from William Willett, who unsuccessfully proposed it to the British Parliament in 1908. Germany, however, seeking cost savings during World War I, heard the idea and enacted it in 1915. Three weeks later, the British followed, and other world powers were close behind, including the United States in 1918.

Reducing energy consumption is still often cited as a chief driver of daylight saving time, but experts can't agree on whether that is actually a result. There have been many conflicting studies.

A Department of Energy report from 2008 found that the extended daylight saving time put in place in 2005 saved about 0.5 percent in total electricity use per day.

But Matthew Kotchen, a Yale economist, found a **1 percent increase in electricity use after Indiana introduced daylight saving statewide in 2006, estimating a cost of \$9 million per year** for consumers.

"The consequence for Indiana has been **higher electricity bills and more pollution from power plants**," Mr. Kotchen wrote in Room for Debate.

Mr. Downing said the idea was originally based on having "an eight-hour economy," but electricity demand is no longer based on sunrises and sunsets — not when there's air conditioning.

"It has long been a cynical substitute for real energy policy," he said. "It's the ideal energy policy because it has no apparent direct cost to consumers, and it asks no one to consume less."