

Upfront

Fall back.

At 2 a.m., Sunday, November 5, Daylight Savings Time (DST) is suspended until Sunday, March 9, 2025. In exchange for an “extra hour” of sleep this Saturday night, we lose precious evening light until a week before St. Patrick’s Day. But, if you’re an early riser, sunrise will greet you before 7 o’clock for a couple of weeks after the change, then slowly inch towards 8 – never quite making it – by the time we spring forward.

Is DST an American thing? No. It’s German, circa 1916. DST was established by the German government during wartime, ostensibly to conserve energy. Germans are considered clever engineers, but the thinking behind the DST initiative isn’t completely sound. Sure, you might not need to light or heat your home or office as early in the morning as you would under darker morning Standard Time conditions, but you’ll flick the switch on an hour sooner than you otherwise would at the end of the day.

A famous American is often linked to the notion of DST. In 1784, Benjamin Franklin penned a satirical essay for a Parisian publication. In “An Economical Project,” Franklin called for Parisians to alter their sleep schedules to save on expenditures like candles and lamp oil. He offered absurdist suggestions for supporting initiatives, like taxes on window shutters, candle rationing, and using cannons to awaken citizens from their slumber. Franklin could be a funny guy (by the standards of his era, anyway).

Not to be outmaneuvered (again) by its colonists, the Brits entered early into the DST discussion. William Willett, an English builder, self-published a pamphlet in 1907 and distributed in London’s Sloane Square. In language befitting a proper subject of The Queen (er... King, at the time...Edward VII) Willett argued, “Now, if some of the hours of wasted sunlight could be withdrawn from the beginning and added to the end of the day, how many advantages would be gained by all, and in particular by those who spend in the open air, when light permits them to do so, whatever time they have at their command after the duties of the day have been discharged.”

“What he said,” I say.

Lest the examples above lead you to conclude that DST is a Western industrialized thing, it is and it isn’t. Asia is the only populated continent without a country that currently adheres to the practice. Perhaps, Japan doesn’t want to reprint all of its collateral to read: “The Land of the Hour-Earlier-in-Winter Rising Sun.

There’s a thesis that suggests DST is an accommodation for the early-American agrarian economy. Not so. In fact, farmers, as an organized group, opposed DST when it was initially proposed. Consider a milk cow. She expects a 5 a.m. feeding, but suddenly she must wait

an extra hour to eat. A cow doesn’t wear a watch; it’s hard to wind the stem with a hoof. It’s hungry when it’s hungry. And it grows accustomed to routine. Arbitrarily disrupting its learned rhythms is sub-optimal. And not every row-crop farmer wants to mount his tractor at 6 in the morning and shut it back in the barn around 4.

Though we Americans were at war with Germany in 1918, we decided to meet the Germans on the battlefield at – literally - the time of their choosing. We imposed DST in March and subsequently synched our clocks with the Kaiser as we fought him until November. After the war ended, in 1919, American authorities rescinded their DST mandate, and the idea lay dormant until World War II. Evidently, there’s nothing like a global conflict to get people thinking about the value of an hour.

In 1966, Congress passed the Unified Time Act, which codified the DST concept for all Americans, save Hawaiians and Arizonans, who preferred to remain on Standard Time year-round. Hawaii is so far from everyone else, it kinda makes sense for them to do their own thing. Arizona, though, they just have to be special. Some of the state is on DST while other regions are simultaneously observing ST (It’s complicated). Also, if it’s 120 in the shade, does it really matter what time it is when the sun is in the sky?

In March of 2021, Florida senator Marco Rubio (nee “Little Marco” to some), introduced the Sunshine Protection Act (SPA), which would put an end to the semiannual changing of the clocks. A year and a week later, the measure passed resoundingly. However, it has not been taken up by the House of Representatives, so it has not been presented to the president to sign into law. In both 2023 and 2024, the Senate reaffirmed its support for the bill through the parliamentary procedure “unanimous consent.” Rubio’s proposal declares DST the year-round time of record nationwide.

Most people seem to like more sun in the evenings. But some “sleep experts” disagree with your preference. Kenneth Wright, director of the University of Colorado Sleep and Chronology Lab notes that more sunlight in the evenings comes at the price of morning light (duh) — a dangerous trade-off, by his account. “Dark mornings mean sleepier commuters, icier roads, and more school children walking to school or waiting for the bus before the sun comes up, he says. “When we get exposed to light at night, that sends a signal to our circadian clock that we should go to bed later and wake up later. Later sleep timing is associated with more substance use and physical and mental health problems, including obesity, depression and heart disease.” (Incidentally, Colorado is consistently listed among the states with the highest rates of recreational marijuana use in the country...notice Wright referred to substance “use” rather than “abuse.”)

Although the SPA remains in legislative limbo, don’t sleep on it, as the expression goes. In 2019, Donald Trump tweeted that he would “sign it” if he had the option to do so as president. As for Kamala Harris, she hasn’t articulated a documented position on the policy yet.



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