

Congress votes overwhelmingly to make Juneteenth a federal holiday. The day commemorates the end of slavery in Texas in 1865.

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Congress on Wednesday voted overwhelmingly to establish Juneteenth as a federal holiday, elevating the day marking the end of slavery in Texas to a national commemoration of emancipation amid a larger reckoning about America’s turbulent history with racism.

It is the first new federal holiday created by Congress since 1983, when lawmakers voted to establish Martin Luther King Jr. Day after a 15-year fight to commemorate the assassinated civil rights leader.

The vote was heralded by the bill’s supporters as a milestone in the effort to foster a greater recognition of the horrors of slavery in the United States and the long history of inequality that followed emancipation and continues to this day.

“It’s a long journey, but here we are,” said Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Tex.), the holiday’s lead proponent in the House. “That racial divide has fallen out of the sky and we are crushing it to the earth. . . . This bill and this day is about freedom.”

The bipartisan support for the federal holiday comes at a time when Congress remains in a partisan deadlock on more substantive priorities for Black leaders, such as a push to federally guarantee voting access in the face of Republican-led state laws restricting it, as well as an effort to pass a federal policing overhaul to deter incidents of brutality and violence by law enforcement against racial minorities.

Sen. Raphael G. Warnock (D-Ga.), one of three Black senators, hailed the new holiday but warned that weightier matters deserved similar cooperation.

“I would hope that we would not cash in substantive change for an opportunity to commemorate,” he said. “I think commemoration ought to drive change and not be a substitute for change.”

The congressional fight to establish Juneteenth as a national holiday was a relatively rapid affair compared to campaign to establish a holiday in King’s honor — it was approved Wednesday by the House on a 415-to-14 vote just a day after the bill establishing the holiday moved suddenly and unanimously through the Senate.

The push to establish June 19 as a national holiday celebrating emancipation only gained serious traction last year, as the nation erupted in turmoil over the

killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a White Minneapolis police officer.

Lawmakers marveled Wednesday over the sudden breakthrough this week, which was triggered by a single Republican senator's announcement that he would no longer object to passage of the bill.

"While freedom was delayed for Black Americans following the end of the Civil War, we will delay no longer in recognizing, today, it finally arrived by making Juneteenth a federal holiday," said Sen. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.), a lead proponent of the federal holiday push, on Wednesday.

The federal holiday, he added, "does not right the wrongs of our nation's past, but it finally gives recognition and voice to those who suffered."

Juneteenth was originally the celebration of the end of slavery in Texas on June 19, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger proclaimed, "All slaves are free" in Galveston — some 30 months after President Abraham Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation. Enslaved people continued to be held in the South after that until liberated by northern troops, and historians have found that slaves continued to be held in some parts of the country even after Granger's order.

Emancipation was ultimately secured in December 1865 with the ratification of the 13th Amendment and the commencement of federal Reconstruction.

But Juneteenth has, over time, become a date of more sweeping significance for African Americans — evolving from folk celebrations in South Texas to a national holiday recognized by 48 states.

It has been a Texas state holiday since 1980, and the state's senior Republican senator, John Cornyn, played a leading role in building GOP support for its passage.

"I believe that there's no better time than the present, particularly given the strife we've seen — this level of distrust for example between law enforcement and the communities they serve — to acknowledge our nation's history, and to learn from it," Cornyn said Wednesday.

While the bill passed the Senate unanimously, 14 House Republicans voted against it Wednesday.

"Let's call an ace an ace. This is an effort by the Left to create a day out of whole cloth to celebrate identity politics as part of its larger efforts to make Critical Race Theory the reigning ideology of our country," Rep. Matthew M. Rosendale (R-Mont.) said in a statement ahead of the vote referring to an intellectual tool set for examining systemic racism that Republicans have denounced. "Since I believe in treating everyone equally, regardless of race, and that we should be focused on what unites us rather than our differences, I will vote no."

Cornyn responded to Rosendale's statement by writing on Twitter: "Kooky."

Several House conservatives rose Wednesday to lodge objections based on the formal name of the bill creating the holiday, the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act. That, they said would detract from the significance of July 4, and one member, Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.), said it would "create confusion and push Americans to pick one of those two days as their independence day based on their racial identity."

The 14 Republicans who voted against the bill were Reps. Andy Biggs (Ariz.), Mo Brooks (Ala.), Andrew S. Clyde (Ga.), Scott DesJarlais (Tenn.), Paul A. Gosar (Ariz.), Ronny Jackson (Tex.), Doug LaMalfa (Calif.), Massie, Tom McClintock (Calif.), Ralph Norman (S.C.), Mike Rogers (Ala.), Rosendale, Chip Roy (Tex.) and Tom Tiffany (Wis.).

Advocates pushing for Congress to address systemic racism more forcefully warned the overwhelming bipartisan support for the holiday should not distract or take momentum away from issues like voting rights.

Amara Enyia, policy and research coordinator for the Movement for Black Lives, said advocates would not be “assuaged or placated” by a new federal holiday.

“There’s always the concern that these things do distract from the substantive issues,” she said. “We acknowledge the importance of Juneteenth, but that just cannot in any way shape or form substitute for the tangible steps that lawmakers need to make to address the issues that folks have been talking about before [the federal holiday] became an issue.”

The rapid passage of the measure took lawmakers across Capitol Hill by surprise. According to Senate aides, the stage was set Tuesday when Sen. Ron Johnson (R-Wis.) publicly announced he would no longer object to passage of the bill after previously opposing it on budgetary grounds.

Senate leaders immediately polled the other 99 senators about the legislation privately, and when none objected, Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) brought it to the Senate floor Tuesday evening for passage. There was no debate.

“We need to celebrate Juneteenth, I have no problem with that,” Johnson said Tuesday. “It’s still bizarre to me that’s the way we celebrate a holiday — you give 2 million Americans a day off to the tune of \$600 million dollars,” referring to a cost estimate on the lost productivity of federal workers.

The House moved quickly Wednesday to pass the bill, and while White House representatives did not respond to questions about whether President Biden intends to sign it, multiple congressional aides said they expected him to do so before this coming June 19.

“Juneteenth is a recognition that darkness can come to light, that there is a celebration as my forefathers and mothers struggled to endure the horror they experienced,” said Rep. Danny K. Davis (D-Ill.), a longtime proponent of the holiday. “And so celebrating Juneteenth as a national holiday is simply an idea whose time has come.”



