Nine Georgetown Law student organizations — spearheaded by the Georgetown Law Students for Democratic Reform and the American Constitution Society — are petitioning Georgetown Law administration to reschedule or cancel class on Election Day.

The initiative began with the publication of an open letter on Facebook, addressed to Dean William Treanor, Dean of Students Mitchell Bailin and Sally McCarthy, Assistant Dean of JD Academic Services.

“Georgetown Law has a strong commitment to public service and civic engagement. As one of the leading law schools in the country, Georgetown has an obligation to demonstrate the importance of equitable participation in our Nation’s democracy,” the letter reads. “By prioritizing the voting of its students, faculty and staff over classes and work on Election Day, Georgetown would exemplify these commitments.”

Dean Bailin, in an email to Atkins, said the law school will remain open and classes will meet on Election Day.

“We certainly encourage participation in electoral activities and the political process. However, after serious consideration, we have decided that Georgetown Law, like many law schools, will remain open and classes will meet on Election Day,” Bailin said.
But he said the administration will advise department heads to be flexible with staff on Nov. 8 so they may find convenient times to vote. In addition, he encouraged students anticipating they will be absent on Election Day to notify professors as soon as possible to secure lecture recordings and class material.

The nine organizations that have since signed on include the Georgetown Law Democrats, Black Law Students Association, National Lawyers Guild and OutLaw, among others.

“Our objective was to draft a short and concise letter asking for what we believed would be the best possible outcome — no classes for anyone and paid leave for staff, so that everybody has the best opportunity possible, not only to vote, but also to otherwise participate in the important activities of the day,” said Alexander Atkins, founder and president of Georgetown Law Students for Democratic Reform.

A handful of other law schools have cancelled Election Day classes, according to the letter, including Northwestern University’s Pritzker School of Law, Liberty University School of Law and University of Kentucky Law School, among others.

Ambur Smith, Student Bar Association delegate and BLSA Attorney General, said she hoped cancelling Election Day classes could be an important legacy for the organizations who signed on.

“My background is in political organizing and I know how difficult it is for people to take the designated time to go out and vote. I’ve always seen the idea of Election Day being a national holiday as something that should be an initiative, and I think an institution like Georgetown has the ability to set that type of precedent both here in the nation’s capital and nationwide,” she said.

The initiative also gained the support of the Student Bar Association, which passed two resolutions after a lengthy discussion on the issue during last Tuesday’s meeting.

The first, cosponsored by SBA Attorney General Claire Chevrier and delegate Andrew Schewier, urged the administration to give the letter and its proposal serious consideration.

The second resolution, submitted by delegate Justin Kirschner, was described by Atkins as a “lighter ask.” Unlike the first, it makes a specific proposal of its own to administration, requesting the administration to designate Election Day a “liberal leave” day rather than a holiday, meaning all students are permitted to access recordings of all classes, professors are prohibited from penalizing students for absence from class and employees who do not report may use their accrued paid leave.

Smith said securing paid leave for staff would send an especially strong message.

“One thing we don’t recognize and can’t really understimate in the context of this election is that the majority of staff on this campus are people of color and there’s a lot at stake for them,” she said.

“It sends a particularly important message to say ‘we recognize that your life extends far beyond this campus, and for one day, we can give you that time off without the headache and encourage you to get involved.’ It encourages people not to be apathetic, which is what a lot of people have resolved to do this election,” she said.

While the next steps for Atkins and the student groups are currently unclear, the Georgetown Law Students for
Democratic Reform and the American Constitution will host a forum in McDonough 110 at noon on Wednesday, Oct. 25, to discuss the issue and solutions further. The meeting is open to the entire student body.

Interested in submitting an opinion column on this or any other law school related issue? E-mail Editor in Chief David Nayer at dan31@georgetown.edu to have your voice heard.

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