

CRS Report for Congress

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“Dear Colleague” Letters: A Brief Overview

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Summary

“Dear Colleague” letters are official correspondence distributed in bulk to Members in both chambers. Primarily, they are used by one or more Members to persuade others to cosponsor or oppose a bill (generally, prior to introduction). Dear Colleague letters might also inform Members of an event connected with congressional business, of new or modified House procedures, or of some other matter. The use of the phrase “‘Dear Colleague’ letter” to refer to a widely distributed letter among Members dates at least to the start of the 20th century. New technologies and expanded use of the Internet have increased the speed and facilitated the process of preparing Dear Colleague letters. This report will be updated as events warrant.

Purpose

“Dear Colleague” letters are official correspondence distributed in bulk to colleagues of a Member, committees, officers of the two chambers, and congressional staff organizations.¹ They are circulated in paper form through internal mail, distributed on the chamber floors, or sent in electronic form via the Mailing Services websites in the House and Member websites in the Senate.²

Dear Colleague letters are primarily used to encourage others to cosponsor or oppose a bill. Additionally, they are used to inform colleagues of events connected with congressional business and to set or modify procedures of the House. The Committee on House Administration, for example, routinely circulates Dear Colleague letters to

¹ U.S. Congress, House, Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *HouseSmart: Reference Guide to Information and Services*, 108th Cong., 2nd sess. (Washington:2004), p. 25.

² Internal mail circulation is accomplished through the House Postal Operations Office or the Senate Printing Graphics and Direct Mail Division in the Senate. Electronic distribution of House Dear Colleague letters is available through the Mailing Services section of HouseNet, the House’s intranet site at [<http://housenet.house.gov>], visited Jan. 5, 2005. HouseNet is available only to Representatives and House staff.

Members concerning matters which affect various internal operations of the chamber, such as upgrades to the elevators in the House Office Buildings.

The form of Dear Colleague letters generally includes a description of the legislation or other subject matter along with a reason or reasons for support or opposition.³ A letter frequently begins with “Dear Colleague.” The length of the correspondence varies; a typical Dear Colleague runs one to two pages. Such correspondence may serve to identify the sender or senders with a particular issue and can form an important “unofficial link” in the information chain around Capitol Hill.⁴

Development

Member-to-Member correspondence of some kind has long been used in Congress. For example, because early House rules required measures to be introduced only in a manner involving the “explicit approval of the full chamber,” Representatives had to receive formal permission to introduce legislation.⁵ A not uncommon communication medium for soliciting support for this action was a letter to colleagues. In 1849, for example, Representative Abraham Lincoln of Illinois formally notified his colleagues in writing that he intended to ask leave of them to introduce a bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.⁶

The use of the phrase “‘Dear Colleague’ letter” has been used to refer to a widely distributed letter among Members at least since early in the 20th century. In 1913, for instance, the *New York Times* included the text of a Dear Colleague letter written by Representative Finley H. Gray (D-IN) to Representative Robert N. Page (D-NC) in which Gray outlined his “conceptions of a fit and proper manner” in which Members of the House should “show their respect for the President” and “express their well wishes” to the first family.⁷ In 1916, the *Washington Post* included the text of a Dear Colleague letter written by Representative William P. Borland (D-MO) distributed to colleagues on

³ “‘Dear Colleague’ Letters,” *Congressional Quarterly’s Guide to Congress*, 2 vols. (Washington: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2000), p. 645; and Abner J. Mikva and Patti B. Saris, *The American Congress: The First Branch* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1983), p. 203. See also Susan Webb Hammond, *Congressional Caucuses in National Policy Making* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), pp. 90, 94, 128, 167, 175, 184, and 215.

⁴ Donald A. Ritchie, “‘Dear Colleague’ letters,” *The Young Oxford Companion to the Congress of the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 67; and Walter Kravitz, *Congressional Quarterly’s American Congressional Dictionary* (Washington: CQ Press, 2001), p. 75.

⁵ The power to introduce a bill was not regarded as the responsibility of any single member. See Joseph Cooper, “Origins of the Standing Committees and the Development of the Modern House,” *Rice University Studies*, vol. 56, summer 1970, p. 3.

⁶ Neil MacNeil, *Forge of Democracy: The House of Representatives* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1963), pp. 57-58.

⁷ “Discord in House Over Wilson Gift,” *The New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1913, p. 10.

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the House floor that provided an explanation of an amendment he had offered to a House bill.⁸

New technologies that enhanced Members' abilities to generate mass mailings (e.g., auto-pen and automated typewriters), together with rules changes that permitted co-sponsorship of bills, coincided with a rise in Dear Colleague letters in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Beginning in 1967, up to 25 cosponsors were allowed on a bill, and in 1979, House rules were amended to permit unlimited numbers of cosponsors.⁹

Congress has since expanded its use of the Internet and electronic devices to facilitate distribution of legislative documents.¹⁰ Electronic Dear Colleague letters are now disseminated via in-house networks in the House and Senate. Such electronic communication has increased the speed and facilitated the process of preparing Dear Colleague letters and other legislative documents.

Practice

In the contemporary Congress, Members use both a system of printed copy distribution or delivery via e-mail for exchanging Dear Colleague letters.

Current House Practice. Dear Colleague letters are centrally administered in the House by the Office of the Chief Administrative Officer. The House *Members' Congressional Handbook* requires a Dear Colleague letter to be written on official letterhead, to address official business and be signed by a Member of Congress, to be accompanied by a cover letter with specific distribution instructions and authorization as to the numbers to be distributed, and to be submitted by set times for inclusion in the morning or afternoon mail delivery.

The current distribution numbers for Dear Colleague letters in the House are set at

- **475** for Members only (including leadership);
- **525** for all Members (including leadership and full committees);
- **625** for Members, full committees and subcommittees;
- **275** for Republican Members, leadership and full majority committees;
- **250** for Republican Members and leadership only;
- **275** for Democratic Members, leadership and full minority committees;
- **250** for Democratic Members and leadership only; and
- **700** for all House mail stops.¹¹

⁸ "Hears Borland Today," *The Washington Post*, Mar. 14, 1916, p. 5.

⁹ See CRS Report 96-727, *Congressional Statistics: Bills Introduced and Laws Enacted, 1947-2003*, by Jennifer E. Manning.

¹⁰ See CRS Report RL31103, *House of Representatives Information Technology Management Issues: An Overview of the Effects on Institutional Operations, the Legislative Process, and Future Planning*, by Jeffrey W. Seifert and R. Eric Petersen.

¹¹ For inclusion in the morning mail, a Dear Colleague letter must be submitted by 9:45 a.m.; for inclusion in the afternoon mail delivery, a Dear Colleague letter must be submitted no later than (continued...)

The current distribution numbers for Dear Colleague letters from the House for the Senate are set at

- **110** for Senators only; and
- **135** for Senators and committees.¹²

When using the paper system, congressional offices create and photocopy their Dear Colleague letters and deliver them to the House Postal Operations Office. When the House Postal Operations Office is closed, letters may be deposited in a drop box located in the vending area of the Longworth cafeteria. A copy of the Dear Colleague letter is delivered to offices as requested. The letter is then distributed within each congressional office following a system devised by that office. Some offices may choose to photocopy the Dear Colleague letter and pass it out to all or a select group of staffers; to a central person in the office; to particular individuals based on content of the message; or post it on a clipboard or bulletin board.

An increasing number of congressional offices transmit Dear Colleague letters electronically. Pursuant to the House *Members' Congressional Handbook*, the rules regulating a paper Dear Colleague letter sent via the postal system are also applicable to a letter sent electronically via the House messaging system. All electronic versions of Dear Colleague letters are traceable and archived for the full House. Users are encouraged to

- include a “keyword” in the subject line to facilitate rules based processing by recipients;¹³
- send the content of a Dear Colleague in the message body, not as an attachment;
- “exercise discretion” when transmitting electronic letters multiple times; and
- not send the same Dear Colleague letter multiple times on the same day.¹⁴

Current Senate Practice. Similar to the House paper system, Dear Colleague letters in the Senate are written on official letterhead to address official business, however, they are not centrally administered. In general, when using the paper system,

¹¹ (...continued)

1:45 p.m. See *HouseSmart: Reference Guide to Information and Services*, p. 25.

¹² A separate cover letter is needed for Senate distribution.

¹³ Recipients of Dear Colleague letters can write rules within their e-mail software that automatically redirects Dear Colleague letters to appropriate office staff. These rules can be based on keywords in the subject line of an e-mail message. A list of current keywords used in to identify House Dear Colleague letters is available to House offices through HouseNet at [<http://onlinecao.house.gov/housesupportservices/dc/guidelines.htm>], visited Jan. 5, 2005.

¹⁴ “Guidelines for Using Electronic Dear Colleagues,” HouseNet, [<http://onlinecao.house.gov/housesupportservices/dc/guidelines.htm>], visited Jan. 5, 2005.

Senators and chamber officers create their own Dear Colleague letters and have them reproduced at the Senate Printing Graphics and Direct Mail Division. Once reproduced, letters are delivered to the Senate Mailroom by the sending office, to be accompanied by a distribution form or cover letter with specific distribution instructions.¹⁵ The choice to send Dear Colleague letters electronically is at the discretion of the individual Senate office. There is no central distribution for such electronic Dear Colleague letters.

¹⁵ “Dear Colleagues” Web page, Webster Senate Intranet, at [<http://webster.senate.gov/SAA/services/subtemplate01.cfm?serviceid=107&subservid=396>]. The Senate Dear Colleague distribution form is available at [<http://webster.senate.gov/uploads/dearcolleagueform.pdf>]. Both pages visited Jan.5, 2005. Webster is available only to Senators and their staff.