



Congressional Franked Mail: Overview

Background

Official mail, sometimes referred to as “franked mail,” allows Members of Congress to transmit mail matter under their signature, or “frank,” without prepayment for postage. Members’ ability to send franked mail facilitates official communication between elected officials and their constituents. Although franked mail does not require prepayment of postage, Congress pays the U.S. Postal Service for the cost of franked mail in annual appropriations bills.

Members’ use and the content of official mail is regulated by several sources, including federal law and chamber rules and regulations. Official communications sent as franked mail may include such items as letters in response to constituent requests for information, newsletters regarding legislation and Member votes, press releases about official Member activities, copies of the *Congressional Record* and government reports, and notices about upcoming town meetings organized by Members, among others.

Member Mail Allowances

Congress pays the U.S. Postal Service (USPS) for franked mail through annual appropriations for the legislative branch. Each chamber uses a formula to allocate funds to Members from these appropriations. In the Senate, the allocation process is administered by the Committee on Rules and Administration; in the House, by the Committee on House Administration.

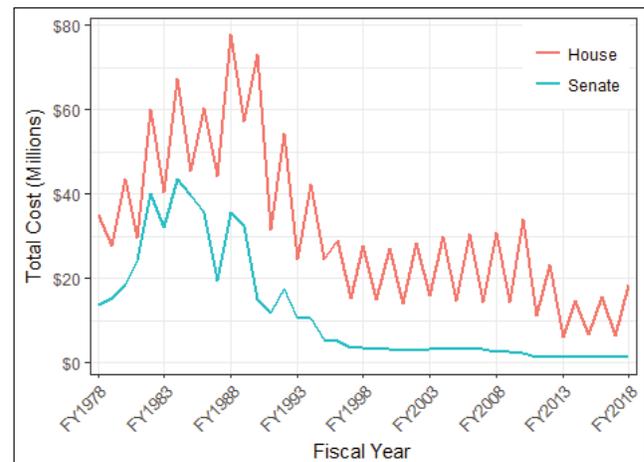
In the Senate, each Senator’s franked mail postage allowance is determined by a formula that gives a maximum allowance equal to the cost of one first-class mailing to every address in the Senator’s state. If the total Senate appropriation for official mail is less than the amount required for the maximum allowance, each Senator’s allowance is proportionally reduced. A Senate office that exceeds its allowance may supplement the allowance with official office account funds. Senators are, however, limited to \$50,000 for mass mailings (defined as 500 or more identical pieces of unsolicited mail) in any fiscal year; mass mailings must be paid through Senators’ Official Personnel and Office Expense Account (SOPOEA).

As with other official expenses, Members of the House are permitted to spend any portion of their Member Representational Allowance (MRA) on franked mail, subject to law and House regulations. The total amount of each Member’s MRA is determined in part by a franked mail postage allowance; this mail allowance is calculated based on the number of nonbusiness addresses in each Member’s district. Each Representative’s franked mail allowance is combined with allowances for office staff and official office expenses to form an overall MRA.

Cost of Congressional Official Mail

According to USPS, Congress spent \$19.8 million on official mail during FY2018, representing approximately 0.4% of the \$4.7 billion budget for the entire legislative branch for FY2018. House official mail costs (\$18.5 million) were 94% of the total, whereas Senate official mail costs (\$1.2 million) were 6% of the total. During FY2017, Congress spent \$7.7 million on official mail. House official mail costs (\$6.5 million) were 85% of the total, whereas Senate official mail costs (\$1.2 million) were 15% of the total. **Figure 1** shows House and Senate official mail costs from FY1979-FY2018.

Figure 1. Official Mail Costs, FY1978-FY2018
By Chamber, Nominal Dollars



Source: CRS analysis of U.S. Postal Service data.

A number of factors, including technological changes and reform efforts, have reduced official mail costs over the past 30 years. Expenditures during even-numbered fiscal years have been reduced by over 80% from a high of \$113.4 million in FY1988 to \$19.8 million in FY2018. Similarly, expenditures during odd-numbered fiscal years have been reduced by over 90% from \$89.5 million in FY1989 to \$7.7 million in FY2017. House mail costs have decreased from a high of \$77.9 million in FY1988 to \$18.5 million in FY2018. The Senate has also reduced its costs, from a high of \$43.6 million in FY1984 to \$1.2 million in FY2018.

Regulation

The use of franked mail is regulated by federal law, House and Senate rules, regulations of the Committee on House Administration and Senate Rules and Administration Committee, and regulations of the Senate Select Committee on Ethics and the House Commission on Congressional Mailing Standards.

Pocket Constitution



The Declaration of Independence
The Constitution of the United States
The Bill of Rights
Amendments XI–XXVII
Gettysburg Address



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Franked mail may be used only for matters of public concern or public service. It may not be used to solicit votes or contributions, to send mail regarding political campaigns or political parties, or to mail autobiographical or holiday greeting materials. Both House and Senate regulations specify limitations on the size and formatting of franked mail. Official funds must be used in the preparation of materials sent under the frank; no private funds may supplement printing, production, or other costs.

Mass mailings are further restricted by law and chamber rules and regulations. Each mass mailing sent by a Member of Congress must bear the following notice: “Prepared, Published, and Mailed at Taxpayer Expense.” Senators are prohibited from sending mass mailings fewer than 60 days prior to any primary election in which they are a candidate, as well as 60 days prior to any general election, regardless of whether or not they are a candidate. House Members are prohibited from sending mass mailings fewer than 90 days prior to any general or primary election in which they are a candidate, and are prohibited from sending unsolicited mass mailings outside their district.

Franking regulations also require disclosure of individual Members’ mass mailings costs. In the House, costs are reported quarterly in the *Statement of Disbursements of the House* as part of a total mass communications cost. Senate costs appear in the biannual *Report of the Secretary of the Senate*.

Electronic Communications

Although all Members continue to use traditional modes of constituent communication, they have many more choices than they did several decades ago. In addition to traditional modes of communication, Members and constituents can now communicate via email, tele-townhalls, and social media, among other means.

In recent years, both Members and constituents have increasingly taken advantage of these new forms of communication. On the constituent side, email has now become the preferred form of communication with Congress. Over time, the volume of emails received by the House of Representatives and the Senate has come to dwarf the volume of incoming postal mail. Communications from Congress have seen a similar transformation; electronic

communications have become the most common method of Members communicating with their constituents.

The rise of electronic communication has altered traditional communications between Members and constituents. Unlike postal letters, electronic communication allows Members to reach large numbers of constituents for a fixed cost, and permits constituents to reach Members at virtually zero cost. Likewise, information gets from Capitol Hill to the rest of the country much more quickly, to the point that as soon as something happens in Congress, it can be known everywhere in real time. Finally, Members can easily reach large numbers of citizens who are not their own constituents.

At the same time that Member use of electronic communications is increasing, the amount spent on official mail is at or near historic lows. The decline in official mail expenditures initially coincided with reform efforts in the late 1980s, including public disclosure of mail costs for individual Members and direct charging of Members’ budgets for the cost of mail they send. However, nominal mail costs have also declined over 40% in the past 12 years, from \$34.1 million in FY2006 to \$19.8 million in FY2018. Adjusted for inflation, this is a decrease in official mail expenditures of over one-half, almost certainly driven in part by a shift toward electronic communications.

For more information on Member communications, see CRS Report R44509, *Social Media in Congress: The Impact of Electronic Media on Member Communications*, by Jacob R. Straus and Matthew E. Glassman. For more information on House Members’ Representational Allowance, see CRS Report R40962, *Members’ Representational Allowance: History and Usage*, by Ida A. Brudnick. For more information on Senate office expenses, see CRS Report R44399, *Senators’ Official Personnel and Office Expense Account (SOPOEA): History and Usage*, by Ida A. Brudnick.

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