

April 25, 2022

Congressional Gold Medals: Categorization of Proposed and Enacted Medals, 1973-2020

In 1776, the Continental Congress awarded the first Congressional Gold Medal to General George Washington for his “wise and spirited conduct” in bringing about the British evacuation of Boston. Since that time, Congress has awarded more than 175 gold medals to express public gratitude on behalf of the nation for distinguished contributions, dramatize the virtues of patriotism, and perpetuate the remembrance of significant events.

The Gold Medal is no ordinary recognition. It is the highest honor bestowed by Congress, approved by bill on behalf of the people of the United States.

-Rep. Bob Schaffer
remarks in the *Congressional Record*, “Mother Teresa and the Gold Medal,” June 23, 1997, p. E1297.

Categorizing Congressional Gold Medals

To better understand the individuals, groups, and events that Congress has considered honoring with a Congressional Gold Medal, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) collected data in cooperation with the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University on the introduction and consideration of commemorative legislation, including Congressional Gold Medals. Overall, CRS and the Bush School students identified 634 measures, honoring 267 distinct subjects (i.e., people, groups, or events), introduced between 1973 and 2020 to authorize Congressional Gold Medals. Of the 267 subjects, 94 (35%) subjects were eventually authorized for commemoration by Congressional Gold Medals in bills enacted into law.

Congressional Gold Medal data were collected from Congress.gov for all measures introduced between the 93rd Congress (1973-1974) and the 116th Congress (2019-2020). If a proposed honoree subsequently received a Congressional Gold Medal, the enactment is not reflected in this In Focus if it occurred after the 116th Congress.

In addition to distinct subjects, proposed and enacted Congressional Gold Medals can be categorized based on their major themes. Building on past categorization efforts, including CRS’s categorization of commemorative works (CRS In Focus IF11833, *Commemorative Works in the District of Columbia: Categorization of Proposed and Enacted Memorials, 1973-2020*), CRS developed eight categories for Congressional Gold Medals introduced since 1973. While some Congressional Gold Medals might fit

into more than one category, CRS placed them into the predominant category, so that each gold medal is only counted in one category. **Figure 1** lists these categories and their definitions.

Figure 1. Congressional Gold Medal Category Terms

| | |
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| Military | Medals honoring individual military leaders and specified military units or groups |
| Humanitarians/Activists | Medals honoring humanitarians and activists (e.g., civil rights leaders, righteous gentiles from the Holocaust, religious leaders, and founders of social cause groups) |
| Academics | Medals honoring historians, economists, and other academics |
| Presidents and First Ladies | Medals honoring former presidents and first ladies |
| Science, Space, and Exploration | Medals honoring scientists, NASA astronauts, and explorers |
| Athletes/Sports | Medals honoring individual athletes or groups of athletes |
| Statespersons/Elected Officials | Medals honoring prominent American and foreign statespersons or elected officials |
| Artists/Writers | Medals honoring artists and writers (e.g., composers, singers, actors, visual artists, and journalists) |

Source: CRS.

Note: “Righteous gentiles” is a shortened reference to the honorific term “Righteous Among the Nations” that was created by Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, Israel, to honor “non-Jews who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust.” For more information, see Yad Vashem, “About the Righteous,” at <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/about-the-righteous.html>.

To categorize each measure to award a Congressional Gold Medal, CRS examined the bill title and text to determine its primary type of honoree and then coded them by theme. Each category is represented once in **Figure 2**, which also includes the number and percentage of each category.



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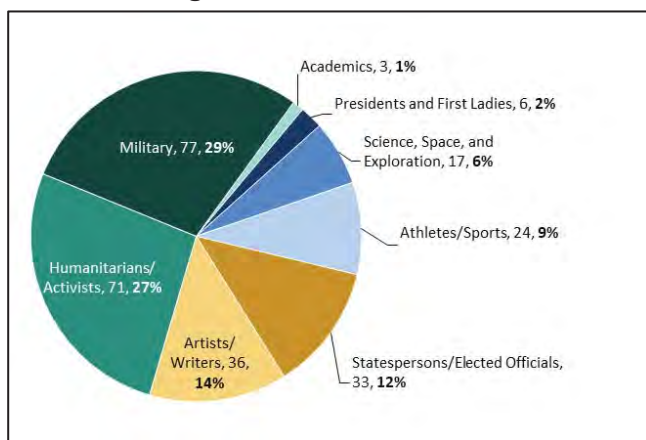
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Figure 2. Categorization of Introduced Congressional Gold Medal Legislation, 1973-2020

Source: CRS analysis of Congressional Gold Medal legislation.

Notes: A total of 267 different subjects for proposed Congressional Gold Medals were introduced. Some subjects were proposed in multiple measures, but each subject is only counted once for this figure.

Overall, legislation to award a Congressional Gold Medal to military units and individual servicemembers was the most common (29%), followed by proposed gold medals for humanitarians and activists (27%). The next most common categories were artists/writers (14%); statespersons and elected officials (12%); athletes and sports (9%); science, space, and exploration (6%); Presidents and first ladies (2%); and academics (1%).

In recent years, the number of proposed and enacted Congressional Gold Medals for groups has grown. Overall, of the introduced measures, approximately one-third (34%) proposed to honor groups, including military service units. Of the enacted measures, prior to 2000, 7 groups were honored. Since 2000, 29 groups have received Congressional Gold Medals.

Overall, between 1973 and 2020, Congress awarded gold medals to 35% of proposed honorees. For honored individuals and groups (enacted measures), on average 2.9 bills were introduced for each proposed honoree, with a minimum of 1 bill (9 honorees) and a maximum of 20 (Native American Code Talkers). For proposed, but not enacted, measures, the average number of bills introduced was 2.5 per proposed honoree, with a minimum of 1 (59 proposed gold medals) and a maximum of 13 (to honor Alice Paul). If a proposed honoree subsequently received a Congressional Gold Medal, the enactment is not reflected in this In Focus if it occurred after the 116th Congress.

Military

Between 1973 and 2020, military gold medals are the most popular category, representing 29% of the proposed honorees. Enacted examples of gold medals in this category include individual servicemembers (e.g., General Colin Powell), military units (e.g., 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team), and groups (e.g., Chinese-American Veterans of World War II).

Humanitarians/Activists

Proposed gold medals to honor humanitarians and activists have been the second-most frequent subject of introduced bills. Between 1973 and 2020, humanitarians and activists represent 27% of the subjects of proposed Congressional Gold Medals. Enacted examples of gold medals for humanitarians and activists have included individuals (e.g., Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.); couples (e.g., Anatoly and Avital Shcharansky), and groups (e.g., Little Rock Nine).

Artists/Writers

Artists are the third-most popular proposed category of honorees for Congressional Gold Medals (14%). Enacted examples include gold medals for Marian Anderson, Charles Schulz, and Constantino Brumidi.

Statespersons/Elected Officials

Statespersons and elected officials represent 12% of proposed Congressional Gold Medals, making it the fourth-most popular category. Enacted examples of statesperson and elected official gold medals include Senator Edward William Brooke, Anwar Sadat, and Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands.

Athletes/Sports

Athletes and sports represent 9% of the subjects of proposed Congressional Gold Medal, making this the fifth-most popular category. Enacted examples of gold medals for athletes and sports include Jesse Owens, Joe Louis, and Arnold Palmer.

Science, Space, and Exploration

Science, Space, and Exploration represent 6% of the subjects of proposed gold medals. This category includes enacted gold medals to individuals (e.g., Dr. Norman Borlaug) and groups (e.g., NASA Hidden Figures).

Presidents and First Ladies

Presidents and First Ladies represent 2% of proposed Congressional Gold Medals. These include enacted gold medals for President Harry Truman, Lady Bird Johnson, President and Mrs. Ford, and President and Mrs. Reagan.

Academics

Legislation to honor three academics (1%) was introduced between 1973 and 2020. Proposed gold medals would have been awarded to honor Milton Friedman, Peter F. Drucker, and Yaffa Eliach.

For more information on Congressional Gold Medals, see CRS Report R45101, *Congressional Gold Medals: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*; and CRS In Focus IF10934, *Duplicate Congressional Gold Medals: Frequently Asked Questions*.

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IF12085

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