

Sponsorship and Cosponsorship of House Bills

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Congressional Procedure

A Practical Guide to the Legislative Process in the U.S. Congress

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Sponsorship and Cosponsorship of House Bills

A Representative who introduces a bill or resolution in the House is called its sponsor. Several Members together may submit a bill, but only the Member whose name appears first is considered its sponsor; the others are cosponsors. A bill can have only one sponsor, but there is no limit on the number of cosponsors it may have.

Representatives may introduce bills in the House by placing them in the wooden box, or “hopper,” located at the bill clerk’s desk on the chamber floor when the House is in session, or by transmitting them electronically to a dedicated email server maintained by the Office of the House Clerk. In either case, the original signature of the sponsor must appear on the measure when it is introduced. Cosponsors do not sign the bill. To add cosponsors, the sponsor may drop in the hopper a cosponsorship form prepared by the Clerk’s office that identifies the names and states of Members who want to be cosponsors. Cosponsorship forms also may be submitted electronically.

Rule XII, clause 7(c) requires sponsors to provide a statement of constitutional authority at the time of introduction. A standing order applicable to the 118th Congress (2023-2024) also requires sponsors to provide “a statement setting forth the single subject of the bill or joint resolution.”

Representatives may cosponsor a bill either at the time of its introduction or subsequently. Members whose names are submitted with a bill at the time of introduction are commonly referred to as “original” cosponsors. Once a bill has been introduced, Members may add their names as cosponsors until the committee(s) to which it was referred have filed their reports with the House or have been discharged from further consideration.

Supporters of a bill often seek cosponsors to demonstrate its support among Members and improve its chances for passage. One of the most common techniques to attract cosponsors is the “Dear Colleague” letter, a notice delivered to some or all Member offices either in print or via email.

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A Representative who introduces a bill or resolution in the House is called its *sponsor*. Under House Rule XII, clause 7, several Members together may submit a bill, but only the Member whose name appears first is considered its sponsor; the others are *cosponsors*. A bill can have only one sponsor, but there is no limit on the number of cosponsors it may have.¹

Sponsorship of a Bill

Representatives may introduce bills or resolutions in the House in one of two ways: by placing them in the wooden box, or “hopper,” located at the bill clerk’s desk on the chamber floor when the House is in session (including a “pro forma” session), or by transmitting them electronically to a dedicated email server maintained by the Office of the House Clerk.² Either way, an original signature of the sponsor must appear on the measure when it is introduced. Cosponsors do not sign the bill. To add cosponsors, the sponsor may drop in the hopper or submit electronically to the Clerk’s office a cosponsorship form that identifies the names and states of Members who want to be cosponsors.³ Cosponsorship is generally viewed as a sign that the Member supports the measure.

Rule XII, clause 7(c) requires that sponsors provide a statement of constitutional authority when introducing a bill (H.R.) or joint resolution (H.J.Res.). The constitutional authority statement is not required to accompany the introduction of simple or concurrent resolutions, neither of which can become law. The constitutional authority of Congress is set forth beginning in Article I, Section 1 of the U.S. Constitution, which states that “All legislative Powers herein granted shall be vested in a Congress of the United States.” Article 1, Section 8 of the founding document contains additional clarity regarding Congress’s enumerated powers.⁴

A standing order applicable to the 118th Congress (2023-2024) also requires sponsors to provide at the time of introduction “a statement setting forth the single subject of the bill or joint resolution.” Both the single subject statement and the constitutional authority statement can be conveyed on a single form prepared by the Clerk’s Office.⁵

Members typically sponsor bills they support. On occasion, a Representative may introduce a bill as a courtesy, such as legislation proposed by the President or a senior Administration official. Citizens and interest group representatives may also ask a Member to introduce legislation on their behalf. In these cases, the sponsor may designate the bill as introduced “by request.” As

¹ Twelve bills with multiple sponsors were introduced on January 4, 1995, in accordance with H.Res. 6 (104th Congress), the House rules package adopted for the 104th Congress (1995-1996). Pursuant to §223(g) of H.Res. 6, the first 20 bills and the first two joint resolutions introduced in the 104th Congress were allowed to have two or more Members reflected as the sponsor. A similar allowance has not been included in the rules of subsequent Congresses.

² Instructions to electronically submit bills, cosponsorship forms, and other legislative documents via the Clerk’s office can be found on HouseNet, the House’s internal website, at <https://housenet.house.gov/legislative/legislative-actions/electronic-submission-of-legislative-documents>. For the Speaker’s stated policy on electronic submissions, see *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 169 (January 9, 2023), p. H75. On bill introduction in the House more generally, see CRS Report R44001, *Introducing a House Bill or Resolution*, by Mark J. Oleszek.

³ Cosponsorship forms are available on HouseNet, at <https://housenet.house.gov/sites/housenet.house.gov/files/forms/Add-Cosponsor-Form.pdf>.

⁴ The House Office of the Legislative Counsel provides guidance on meeting this requirement at http://legcoun.house.gov/members/HOLC/Resources/const_auth_statement.html. See also CRS In Focus IF12314, *Constitutional Authority Statements: A Quick Guide*, by Whitney K. Novak.

⁵ The form used to make constitutional authority and single subject statements is available on HouseNet, at <https://housenet.house.gov/sites/housenet.house.gov/files/forms/required-statements-for-introduction.pdf>.

House Rule XII, clause 7(a)(5) states, “When a bill or resolution is introduced ‘by request,’ those words shall be entered on the Journal and printed in the *Congressional Record*.” Introducing a bill “by request” allows for a degree of separation between the sponsor of the measure and the legislative text it contains.

A sponsor may not reclaim or modify a measure after it has been assigned a number and referred to committee, a process that normally occurs on the same day a measure is introduced. Once a measure has been numbered and referred, it becomes the property of the House and its text cannot be modified by the sponsor (or any other Member), even by unanimous consent, regardless of how cosmetic any modifications might be. It is too late at this point to make any changes to the bill except by amending it on the House floor during its consideration.⁶ Of course, a sponsor may decide to introduce a new bill containing whatever textual adjustments need to be made.

Introduced bills and resolutions can be taken up by the House even if the sponsor resigns from the House or dies. If a sponsor is no longer a Member of the House, another Member may be designated “first sponsor” by unanimous consent to manage cosponsorship requests involving measures sponsored by the departed Member.⁷ A current Member may also draft and introduce a similar or identically worded bill to one sponsored by a departed Member, in which case the current Member would be identified as the sponsor.

Cosponsorship of a Bill

Representatives may cosponsor a bill or resolution either at the time of its introduction or subsequently.⁸ Members whose names are submitted with the measure at the time of introduction are commonly referred to as “original” cosponsors, and those Members will be identified as such when the bill is first printed. Once a bill has been introduced, Members may add or remove their names as cosponsors until the bill has been reported from all the committees to which it is referred, or until the committees in possession of the bill have been discharged from further consideration. If an unreported bill is scheduled for consideration on the House floor—which may occur by way of the suspension procedure (House Rule XV) or under the terms of a special rule reported by the Rules Committee and agreed to by the House—then cosponsors may be added or removed up to the point that a vote occurs on the motion to suspend the rules or the measure is called up under the terms of the special rule.

Adding cosponsors can be accomplished with the same form used to identify original cosponsors. Completed forms are to be signed by the sponsor and placed in the hopper when the House is in session, or submitted electronically to the Clerk’s office. The names of added cosponsors will appear in the *Congressional Record* and in any subsequent printings of the bill. Sponsors and cosponsors of bills and resolutions may also be found by searching congress.gov, an online

⁶ On House amending practices, see CRS Report 98-995, *The Amending Process in the House of Representatives*, by Christopher M. Davis.

⁷ Proceedings to designate a Member as “first sponsor” can be found in the *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 166 (September 28, 2022), p. H8179. If another Member is not so designated, then a Member may request unanimous consent to be added as a cosponsor to an unreported bill sponsored by a departed Member. Ordinarily, the presiding officer will not entertain requests made on the floor to be added as a cosponsor.

⁸ Only House bills and resolutions may be cosponsored by Members. Support for a Senate measure can be expressed in alternative ways, for instance through a floor statement made during a period reserved for nonlegislative debate. See CRS Report R46626, *Nonlegislative Debate in the House: One-Minute, Morning-Hour, and Special-Order Speeches*, by Jane A. Hudiburg.

database of legislative activity.⁹ House Rule XII, clause 7(b) allows a bill to be reprinted if 20 or more cosponsors have been added since the previous printing, provided the sponsor submits a written request to the Speaker to have the bill reprinted.

A cosponsor may also have his or her name removed from a bill until the last committee of referral has filed its report with the House or has been discharged from its consideration. While adding cosponsors can be transacted through the hopper or electronically, removing a cosponsorship requires the sponsor of the bill to make a unanimous consent request to that effect on the House floor.¹⁰ Cosponsors also may remove themselves from a bill or resolution by stating this intention on the House floor. Removal initiated by a cosponsor does not require the unanimous consent of the House.¹¹

Rules governing the number of cosponsors permitted on a bill have changed over the years. From 1967 to 1979, House rules limited the number of cosponsors to 25 per bill, requiring the introduction of identical bills when the number of cosponsors exceeded 25. Since 1979, an unlimited number of cosponsors have been allowed. Private bills, however, are prohibited from having cosponsors.¹²

Rules first adopted by the House in the 116th Congress (2019-2020) offer a possible pathway to the floor for unreported but broadly supported measures that attract at least 290 cosponsors. Under Clause 7 of House Rule XV, measures that maintain 290 or more cosponsors for a cumulative period of 25 legislative days can be placed on a “Consensus Calendar” if the sponsor submits a request to the Clerk to place the measure on this calendar.¹³ On weeks in which the House convenes—unless before March 1 of an odd-numbered year or after September 30 of an even-numbered year (the first and last months of a Congress)—Rule XV requires the Speaker to designate and schedule for floor consideration at least one measure listed on the Consensus Calendar.¹⁴

Gaining Cosponsors

Supporters of a bill often seek cosponsors to demonstrate its popularity and improve its chances for passage. One of the most common techniques to attract cosponsors is the “Dear Colleague”

⁹ While amendments generally do not obtain cosponsors, a protocol of the Rules Committee prioritizes for floor consideration any amendment submitted to the committee that identifies 20 or more Members from each party as cosponsors. Protocols of the Rules Committee and a template for amendment cosponsorship submissions are available at <https://rules.house.gov/rules-and-resources/rules-committee-protocol>.

¹⁰ An example request can be found in the *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 165 (September 26, 2019), p. H8041.

¹¹ An example statement can be found in the *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 168 (April 5, 2022), p. H4184.

¹² For additional information on the consideration of private bills in the House, see CRS Report R45287, *Private Bills: Procedure in the House*, by Christopher M. Davis.

¹³ A “legislative” day is a period of time that starts when the House convenes following an adjournment and ends when the chamber next adjourns. In most cases, because the House usually adjourns each day it is in session, legislative days correspond with “calendar” days (a standard 24-hour period) on which the House meets. If the House instead recesses or remains in session from one calendar day to the next, the same legislative day would extend into the next calendar day. See CRS Report R42977, *Sessions, Adjournments, and Recesses of Congress*, by Richard S. Beth and Valerie Heitshusen.

¹⁴ See CRS Report R46485, *The House Consensus Calendar: Establishment, Principal Features, and Practice in the 116th Congress (2019-2020)*, by Jane A. Hudiburg.

letter, a notice delivered to some or all Member offices either in print or via email. These letters are so-called after the salutation with which they begin.¹⁵

No House rules govern “Dear Colleague” letters. They are, in effect, a sponsor’s advertisement for a bill (or, sometimes, an amendment). A typical letter will briefly state the issue the bill addresses, its major components, and its policy importance, and include an invitation to sign on as a cosponsor. Almost always, they carry the name and email address of a staff aide to contact. A system for distributing “Dear Colleagues” electronically was implemented in the 110th Congress.¹⁶

Before a bill is formally introduced, a Member who wishes to become a cosponsor, or an aide acting at his or her direction, may contact the sponsoring Member’s office and request to be added to the bill. A form listing cosponsors is usually kept by a staff aide and submitted along with the bill at introduction. After the bill is introduced, a Member may also contact the sponsor’s office and ask to be listed as a cosponsor. The sponsor decides when to submit these additional cosponsors to the Clerk for publication in the *Congressional Record*.

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The original version of this report was written by former CRS Specialist Richard C. Sachs. Congressional clients may direct any inquiries to the current author.

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¹⁵ See CRS Report R44768, “*Dear Colleague*” Letters in the House of Representatives: Past Practices and Issues for Congress, by Jacob R. Straus.

¹⁶ The House’s “e-Dear Colleague” system is online at <https://e-dearcolleague.house.gov>.

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