

CRS Report for Congress

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Sponsorship and Cosponsorship of Senate Bills

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A Senator who introduces a bill or other measure in the Senate is called its *sponsor*. Senators may together submit a bill, but the first-named Senator is considered the chief sponsor. The others are considered *cosponsors*. A bill can have only one chief sponsor.

Sponsorship of a Bill

Senators introduce bills in the Senate chamber by handing them to a clerk at the table below the dais. The chief sponsor's signature must appear on the measure when it is introduced.

In a strictly formal sense, sponsorship of a bill only identifies the Senator who introduces it, and does not necessarily indicate support. Practically, however, Senators sponsor bills they support. And cosponsors almost always add their names to a bill to indicate support.

A Senator may, however, introduce a bill as a courtesy, such as legislation proposed by the President. In such a case, the sponsor may designate the bill as introduced "by request."

Once a bill has been handed to the clerk, it becomes the property of the Senate and cannot be withdrawn. If a Senator desires that no action be taken on the bill, the Senator may by unanimous consent request that action on the bill be indefinitely postponed.

As noted above, only one Senator can be the sponsor of a bill. Sometimes, a bill may become popularly known by the names of more than one Senator, for example, the 1995 Kassebaum-Kennedy health care bill. Only the first named Senator is the chief sponsor, in this case, Senator Kassebaum. Others identified, even though they may be seen both in Congress and by the general public as equally responsible for the bill, are, according to Senate procedure, cosponsors. The strategy of associating legislation with the names of more than one Senator is sometimes useful in gaining support across partisan or ideological ranks.

A Senate committee may report legislation it has drafted itself as an *original bill*. In such a case, there is no sponsor and there are no cosponsors. When the legislation is reported and a final draft printed, a Senator brings the draft to the clerk on the chamber floor, the draft is assigned a bill number, and the name of the Senator who brought the legislation forward is indicated on the bill. That Senator may be the committee chairman, but he is not, under Senate procedure, the sponsor.

For example, the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations reported an original bill in September 1997, on the issue of administration of national *au pair* programs. The legislative language was drafted, marked up, and reported by the committee. Because the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee presented the legislation to the bill clerk, the bill indicates, “Mr. Helms, from the Committee on Foreign Relations, reported the following original bill....” But, under Senate procedure, Senator Helms is not the sponsor of the bill.

Cosponsorship of a Bill

When a Senator introduces a bill, he or she commonly attaches to the bill a form with the names of cosponsors. Before a bill is formally introduced, a Senator becomes a cosponsor by contacting the office of the chief sponsor and requesting his or her name be added to the bill. Initial cosponsors can be added until the bill is presented to the clerk in the Senate chamber. There is no limit to the number of cosponsors that can be added to a bill.

After a bill is introduced, if a Senator wishes to become a cosponsor, he or she may request unanimous consent to be added as a cosponsor. A Senator may also contact the chief sponsor’s office and ask to be included, or may add his or her name by calling the party cloakroom. However, a Senator’s name can only be formally added to a bill by a unanimous consent request on the chamber floor.

The printed names of additional cosponsors are added if there is a subsequent printing of the bill. However, under the regulations of the Joint Committee on Printing, a bill cannot be reprinted solely for the purpose of adding cosponsors. Additional cosponsors also are listed in the *Congressional Record* and in Congress’ computerized legislative information system

Unless agreed to by unanimous consent, a bill, upon introduction, may be held at the desk for a day, but no longer, for the purpose of adding one or more cosponsors.

The number of cosponsors that a bill attracts is usually seen as a measure of support, and Senators and aides use a variety of techniques to encourage colleagues to sign on. One of the most common is the “Dear Colleague” letter, a mailing to some or all Senators soliciting support for a bill. The letter is so named because it nearly always begins with the appellation “Dear Colleague.”

No Senate rules or any formal procedures govern “Dear Colleague” letters. They are, in effect, advertisements for the sponsoring Senator’s (or Senators’) legislation. The letters might briefly state the issue the legislation addresses, the major components of the measure, the likely impact of the legislation, and an appeal to join as a cosponsor. Almost always, the letters carry the name and phone number of a staff aide.