



“Dear Colleague” Letters: Current Practices

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Summary

“Dear Colleague” letters are correspondence signed by Members of Congress and distributed to their colleagues. Such correspondence is often used by one or more Members to persuade others to cosponsor, support, or oppose a bill. “Dear Colleague” letters also inform Members about new or modified congressional operations or about events connected to congressional business. A Member or group of Members might send a “Dear Colleague” letter to all of their colleagues in a chamber, to Members of the other chamber, or to a subset of Members, such as all Democrats or Republicans. The use of the phrase “Dear Colleague” to refer to a widely distributed letter among Members dates at least to the start of the 20th century, and refers to the generic salutation of these letters. New technologies and expanded use of the Internet have increased the speed and facilitated the process of distributing “Dear Colleague” letters.

Contents

Background	1
Development.....	1
Use of “Dear Colleague” Letters	2
House of Representatives	2
Internal Mail	3
e-“Dear Colleague” System.....	4
Senate.....	5

Contacts

Author Contact Information	6
Acknowledgments	6

Background

A “Dear Colleague” letter is official correspondence that is sent by a Member, committee, or officer of the House of Representatives or Senate and that is widely distributed to other congressional offices.¹ A “Dear Colleague” letter may be circulated in paper through internal mail, distributed on a chamber floor, or sent electronically.²

“Dear Colleague” letters are often used to encourage others to cosponsor, support, or oppose a bill. “Dear Colleague” letters concerning a bill or resolution generally include a description of the legislation or other subject matter along with a reason or reasons for support or opposition.³

Additionally, “Dear Colleague” letters are used to inform Members and their offices about events connected to congressional business or modifications to House or Senate operations. The Committee on House Administration and the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, for example, routinely circulate “Dear Colleague” letters to Members concerning matters that affect House or Senate operations, such as House changes to computer password policies⁴ or a reminder about Senate restrictions on mass mailings prior to elections.⁵

These letters frequently begin with the salutation “Dear Colleague.” The length of such correspondence varies, with a typical “Dear Colleague” running one to two pages.⁶

Development

Member-to-Member correspondence has long been used in Congress. For example, since early House rules required measures to be introduced only in a manner involving the “explicit approval of the full chamber,” Representatives needed permission from other Members to introduce legislation.⁷ A common communication medium for soliciting support for this action was a letter to colleagues. For example, Representative Abraham Lincoln, in 1849, formally notified his

¹ U.S. Congress, House, Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, *HouseSmart: Reference Guide to Information and Services*, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington: 2005), p. 29. (Hereafter *HouseSmart*.)

² Internal mail circulation is handled by the House Postal Operations Office and the Senate Printing Graphics and Direct Mail Division. Electronic distribution of House “Dear Colleague” letters is available through a web-based e-“Dear Colleague” distribution system. Instructions on sending electronic “Dear Colleagues” can be found at <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov>. The e-“Dear Colleague” website is available only to Members of the House of Representatives and their staff.

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 Dear Colleague letter from Daniel Beard, chief administrative officer of the House, “Computer Password Protection Update,” August 22, 2008.

⁵ Dear Colleague letter from Senator Dianne Feinstein, chair, and Senator Robert Bennett, ranking member, Senate Committee on Rules and Administration, July 30, 2008.

⁶ Walter Kravitz, *Congressional Quarterly’s American Congressional Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 2001), p. 75.

⁷ The power to introduce a bill was not regarded as the authority 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.

colleagues in writing that he intended to seek their authorization to introduce a bill to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia.⁸

The use of the phrase “Dear Colleague” has been used to refer to a widely distributed letter among Members at least since early in the 20th century. In 1913, the *New York Times* included the text of a “Dear Colleague” letter written by Representative Finley H. Gray to Representative Robert N. Page 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.⁹ In 1916, the *Washington Post* included the text of a “Dear Colleague” letter written by Representative William P. Borland and distributed to colleagues on the House floor. The letter provided an explanation of an amendment he had offered to a House bill.¹⁰

Congress has since expanded its use of the Internet and electronic devices to facilitate distribution of legislative documents. Electronic “Dear Colleague” letters can be disseminated via internal networks in the House and Senate, supplementing or supplanting paper forms of the letters. Such electronic communication has increased the speed and facilitated the process of distributing “Dear Colleague” letters.

Use of “Dear Colleague” Letters

In the contemporary Congress, Members use both printed copy distribution and electronic delivery for sending “Dear Colleague” letters.

House of Representatives

In the House, Members may choose to send “Dear Colleague” letters through internal mail, through the electronic e-“Dear Colleague” system, or both. Regardless of distribution method, House “Dear Colleague” letters are required to address official business and must be signed by a Member or officer of Congress.¹¹

Members of the House often send out “Dear Colleague” letters to recruit cosponsors for their measures.¹² The practice of recruiting cosponsors has become more important since the passage of H.Res. 42 in the 90th Congress (1967-1968). H.Res. 42 amended House rules to permit bill cosponsors, but limited the number to 25.¹³ In 1978, the House agreed to H.Res. 86, which further amended House rules to permit unlimited numbers of cosponsors.¹⁴

⁸ Neil MacNeil, *Forge of Democracy: The House of Representatives* (New York: David McKay Company Inc., 1963), pp. 57-58.

⁹ “Discord in House over Wilson Gift,” *The New York Times*, October 31, 1913, p. 10.

¹⁰ “Hears Borland Today,” *The Washington Post*, March 14, 1916, p. 5.

¹¹ *HouseSmart*, p. 25. Officers include the chief administrative officer, the clerk of the House of Representatives, the sergeant at arms, and the chaplain.

¹² (name redacted) and (name redacted), *Congressional Deskbook: The Practical and Comprehensive Guide to Congress* (Alexandria, VA: TheCapitol.Net, 2007), p. 257.

¹³ H.Res. 42 (90th Cong.), agreed to April 25, 1967. See Rep. William Colmer et al., “To Amend the Rules of the House of Representatives,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 113, part 8 (April 25, 1967), pp. 10708-10712. Prior to agreeing to H.Res. 42 (90th Congress), House Rules did not permit cosponsorship or joint introduction of legislation. For more information, see U.S. Congress, House, *Cannon’s Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States*, vol (continued...)

Internal Mail

“Dear Colleague” letters sent through internal mail must be written on official letterhead, address official business, and be signed by a Member or officer of Congress.¹⁵ A cover letter must accompany the “Dear Colleague” letter, addressed to the director of the House customer solution center,¹⁶ with specific distribution instructions and authorization as to the number to be distributed.¹⁷ These materials must be submitted by 9:45 a.m. for morning distribution and 1:45 p.m. for afternoon mail delivery.¹⁸

The current number of paper copies needed for distribution of a “Dear Colleague” letter in the House is

- **475** for all Members only (including leadership);
- **525** for all Members (including leadership and full committees);
- **625** for Members, full committees, and subcommittees;
- **300** for Republican Members, leadership, and full Republican committees;
- **275** for all Republican Members and leadership only;
- **250** for Democratic Members, leadership, and full Democratic committees;
- **200** for all Democratic Members and leadership only; and
- **700** for all House mail stops.¹⁹

For distribution to the Senate, House “Dear Colleague” letters must have a separate cover letter addressed to the deputy chief administrative officer of the House for customer solutions, adhere to the same standards as House “Dear Colleague” letters, and follow the current distribution numbers of

- **110** for Senators only, and
- **135** for Senators and committees.

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VII, prepared by Clarence Cannon, (Washington: GPO, 1935), § 1029, p. 160.

¹⁴ H.Res. 86 (95th Cong.), agreed to October 10, 1978. The provisions of H.Res. 86 did not become effective until the beginning of the 96th Congress (1979-1980) in January 1979. Prior to this rules change, if a measure had more than 25 cosponsors—including the original sponsor—additional identical bills were introduced for each group of 24 cosponsors. See Rep. Gillis Long, “Amending Rules Concerning Cosponsorship of Public Bills and Resolutions,” *Congressional Record*, vol. 124, part 26 (October 10, 1978), pp. 34929-34930; and U.S. Congress, House, *Deschler’s Precedents of the United States House of Representatives*, vol. 4, prepared by Lewis Deschler, parliamentarian, 94th Cong., 2nd sess., H.Doc. 94-661 (Washington: GPO, 1976), ch 16, § 2.2, p. 208.

¹⁵ *HouseSmart*, p. 25.

¹⁶ A sample letter for distribution of hard copy “Dear Colleague” letters is available on Housenet.house.gov at https://housenet.house.gov/portal/server.pt/document/14114/dear_colleague_hard_copy_cover_sheet.

¹⁷ Telephone conversation between the author and FirstCall+, September 25, 2007.

¹⁸ *HouseSmart*, p. 25; and U.S. Congress, House, Chief Administrative Officer, “Hard Copy Dear Colleague Instructions,” https://housenet.house.gov/portal/server.pt/community/dear_colleagues/313/hard_copy_dear_colleague.

¹⁹ U.S. Congress, House, Chief Administrative Officer, “Hard Copy Dear Colleague Instructions,” https://housenet.house.gov/portal/server.pt/community/dear_colleagues/313/hard_copy_dear_colleague.

When using the paper system, congressional offices create and photocopy their “Dear Colleague” letters and deliver them to either the First Call Customer Service Center²⁰ or to the House Postal Operations Office.²¹ 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.

e-“Dear Colleague” System

On August 12, 2008, the House introduced a web-based *e-“Dear Colleague”* distribution system. The *e-“Dear Colleague”* system replaced the email-based system.²² Under the *e-“Dear Colleague”* system, then-chair of the Committee on House Administration, Representative Robert Brady, wrote that Members and staff “will be able to compose *e-Dear Colleagues* online, and associate them with up to three issue areas. Members and staff will be able to independently manage their subscription to various issue areas and receive *e-Dear Colleagues* according to individual interest.”²³ Pursuant to the House *Members’ Congressional Handbook*, the rules regulating a paper “Dear Colleague” letter sent via internal mail are also applicable to a letter sent electronically.²⁴

House Members and staff who want to use the *e-Dear Colleague* system can subscribe and send letters at <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov>.²⁵ During the registration process, they may choose up to 32 issue areas for which they wish to receive “Dear Colleague” letters. The website also allows them to sign up for either the Republican or Democratic “Dear Colleague” distribution lists.²⁶ Additionally, the website enables individuals “to search all *e-Dear Colleagues* by session, date, issue area, and keyword or bill number.”²⁷ The *e-Dear Colleague* system did not alter the process for the delivery of paper “Dear Colleague” letters.

To send an *e-“Dear Colleague”* letter, an individual staff member views <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov> and clicks on send. This action brings up the send screen, where the staff member takes the following actions:

- enters his or her email address, the type of office the staff member works in (i.e., Member, leadership, committee, or other), and the Member’s, committee’s, or office’s name;

²⁰ The First Call+ Customer Service Center is located in B-227 Longworth House Office Building.

²¹ U.S. Congress, Committee on House Administration, *Committee Handbook*, p. 21, at <http://cha.house.gov/PDFs/CommitteeHandbook.pdf8>.

²² Electronic Dear Colleague System Stakeholder Session briefing with John Clocker, Office of the Chief Administrative Officer of the House of Representatives, June 25, 2008.

²³ Dear Colleague Letter from Representative Robert A. Brady, chair, Committee on House Administration, “New Web-based *e-Dear Colleague* System went live today, August 12, 2008,” August 12, 2008.

²⁴ U.S. Congress, Committee on House Administration, *Members’ Handbook*, p. 41, at <http://cha.house.gov/PDFs/MembersHandbook.pdf>.

²⁵ The <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov> website is only available to the House of Representatives.

²⁶ Subscription to the Republican and Democratic distribution lists is voluntary and is not verified for actual caucus affiliation.

²⁷ Dear Colleague Letter from Representative Robert A. Brady, chair, Committee on House Administration, “New Web-based *e-Dear Colleague* System went live today, August 12, 2008,” August 12, 2008.

- types in a letter title, selects whether it is a letter to be sent to either the Republican or Democratic distribution lists,²⁸ and chooses up to three issues to associate with the letter;
- types, or cuts and pastes, the letter into the text editor on the webpage, including uploading any graphics or attachments;
- associates the letter with a particular bill or resolution number (optional); and
- reviews the letter before sending.

Following the completion of this process, staff members receive an email asking them to confirm that they are sending the “Dear Colleague” letter. A final opportunity to edit the letter is also provided. Once the letter is completed, it is sent to all individuals who have selected to receive “Dear Colleague” letters in issue areas associated with the letter.

Electronic versions of “Dear Colleague” letters sent prior to August 12, 2008, are stored in a Microsoft Exchange public folder that is accessible to all House Members and staff.²⁹ Electronic versions of “Dear Colleague” letters sent on or after August 12, 2008, are archived on the House e-“Dear Colleague” website.³⁰

Senate

Similar to the House paper system, “Dear Colleague” letters in the Senate are written on official letterhead and address official business, but there is not a central distribution policy. In general, when using the paper system, 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, paper copies of the “Dear Colleague” letters are delivered to the Senate Mailroom by the sending office, accompanied by a distribution form or cover letter with specific distribution instructions.³¹

As prescribed by the Senate, current distribution numbers for “Dear Colleague” letters in the Senate are

- **100** for all Senators;
- **20** for standing, select, and special committees;
- **5** for the joint leadership; and
- **1** each for the officers of the Senate (total of 7).³²

²⁸ “Dear Colleague” letters do not have to be associated with a party. The letters can just be associated with up to three issues.

²⁹ Based on email between the author and John Clocker, advanced business solutions, Chief Administrative Officer of the House, September 11, 2008.

³⁰ U.S. Congress, Chief Administrative Officer of the House of Representatives, “Search e-Dear Colleagues,” <http://e-dearcolleague.house.gov/search.aspx>.

³¹ “Dear Colleagues” webpage, Webster Senate Intranet, at <http://webster.senate.gov/saa/services/subtemplate01.cfm?serviceid=107&subservid=396>. Webster is available only to Senators and their staff.

³² Senate “Dear Colleague” distribution form is available at <http://webster.senate.gov/uploads/dearcolleagueform.pdf>. Officers of the Senate include the President of the Senate, President pro tempore, secretary of the majority, secretary of (continued...)

The choice to send "Dear Colleague" letters electronically is at the discretion of the individual Senate office. There is no central distribution system for electronic Senate "Dear Colleague" letters.³³

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Acknowledgments

This report revises an earlier report by (name redacted).

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the minority, secretary of the Senate, sergeant at arms, and chaplain. While Senators do send "Dear Colleague" letters to the House, no specific distribution numbers are provided by the Senate.

³³ While no central distribution system for electronic "Dear Colleague" letters exists in the Senate, other organizations (i.e., party organizations and informal caucuses) may choose to distribute "Dear Colleague" letters to their membership.

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