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Sponsorship and Cosponsorship of House Bills

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A Representative who introduces a bill or other measure in the House is called its *sponsor*. Under House Rule XII, clause 7, several Members together may submit a bill, but the first-named Member is the chief or primary sponsor; the others are *cosponsors*. A bill can have only one primary sponsor.

Sponsorship of a Bill

Representatives introduce bills in the House chamber by placing them in the clerk’s “hopper,” a box at the rostrum, when the House is in session. The original signature of the sponsor must appear on the measure when it is introduced. Cosponsors do not sign the bill; the sponsor need only submit a list of names when the bill is dropped in the hopper. Cosponsors commonly ask the sponsors to add their names to a bill to signal support for the measure.¹

Rule XII, clause 7(c) requires that sponsors provide a statement of constitutional authority at the time of introduction.²

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. In such a case, the sponsor may designate the bill as introduced “by request.” As 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*.”

A sponsor may withdraw the measure he or she has placed in the hopper only until it receives a number and is referred to committee. Once referred, neither the sponsor nor any cosponsor nor any other Member may withdraw the bill, even by unanimous consent. The measure becomes the property of the House, and the House may act on it even if the sponsor resigns from the House, or dies.

Cosponsorship of a Bill

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 bill has been reported from all the committees to which it is referred (or until the committees have been discharged from further consideration of the bill).

The names of added cosponsors appear in the *Congressional Record* and in any subsequent prints of the bill. Sponsors and cosponsors of bills and amendments may be found by searching the Legislative Information System (LIS), CRS’s online legislative resource.³ House Rule XII

¹ For further information on bill introduction in the House, see CRS Report 98-458, *Introducing a House Bill or Resolution*, by (name redacted).

² For the constitutional authority form, see HouseNet link, at <http://legcoun.house.gov/members/cas.html>. For further information on the kinds of authority that could be cited to meet this requirement, see CRS Report R41548, *Sources of Constitutional Authority and House Rule XII, Clause 7(c)*, by (name redacted), as well as guidance issued from the House Legislative Counsel, at http://legcoun.house.gov/members/HOLC/Resources/const_auth_statement.html.

³ Located at <http://www.congress.gov/>.

provides that a bill may be reprinted if 20 or more cosponsors have been added since the previous printing, and the primary sponsor submits a written request for the Speaker to reprint the bill.

A cosponsor may also have his or her name removed from a bill until the last committee of referral has reported it. For this purpose, either the cosponsor or the primary sponsor of the bill must request unanimous consent on the House floor.

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 has been allowed. Private bills are prohibited from having cosponsors.

Gaining Cosponsors

Supporters of a bill often seek cosponsors in hope of demonstrating its popularity and improving its chances for passage. One of the most common techniques for soliciting support for a bill is the “Dear Colleague” letter, a mass mailing to selected or all Members. These letters are so called after the salutation with which they begin.

No House rules or formal procedures govern “Dear Colleague” letters. They are, in effect, a sponsor’s advertisement for a bill (or, sometimes, an amendment). Typically, the letters briefly state the issue the bill addresses, its major components, and its policy importance, and include an appeal to join as a cosponsor. Almost always, they carry the name and phone number of a staff aide to contact. A new system for distributing “Dear Colleagues” through the Internet was implemented in the 110th Congress.⁴

Before a bill is formally introduced, a Member, or an aide acting at his or her direction, who wishes to become a cosponsor may contact the sponsoring Member’s office and request that his or her name be added to the bill. A form listing cosponsors is kept, usually 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 House Clerk for publication in the *Congressional Record*.

⁴ See CRS Report RL34636, “Dear Colleague” Letters: Current Practices, by (name redacted).

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