



Congressional Involvement in the Design of Circulating Coins

In April 1792, the Coinage Act (1 Stat. 246) established the United States Mint. Pursuant to the act, Congress prescribed various aspects of the design of circulating coins. For example, the Coinage Act directed the U.S. Mint to strike coins of specific denominations—Eagles (\$10), Half Eagles (\$5), Quarter Eagles (\$2.5), Dollars (\$1), Half dollars (\$0.50), quarter dollars (\$0.25), dimes (\$0.10), half dimes (\$0.05), cents (\$0.01), and half cents (\$0.005)—with specific images and words, including images of eagles and the words “United States of America.” Additionally, recent laws have prescribed certain images—such as which Presidents appear on the obverse of which coins and what images are to appear on the coins’ reverse—through law.

Since its founding, the U.S. Mint has continued to strike circulating coins and Congress has continued to instruct the U.S. Mint on coin designs, inscriptions, denominations, and metallic contents. Except for the 1976-1977 Bicentennial issues, the designs on U.S. coins have remained similar since 1964, when the John F. Kennedy half dollar was first minted. **Figure 1** shows the obverse design for current coins.

Figure 1. U.S. Mint Circulating Coins Obverse



Source: U.S. Mint.

Note: Images are not to scale.

Current Coinage Requirements

Most aspects of circulating coinage are required by law. Pursuant to statute (31 U.S.C. §5112), Congress instructs the Secretary of the Treasury, through the U.S. Mint, to issue specific denominations of circulating coins and specifies the coins’ size, weight, and metallic content. For example, the U.S. Mint is to issue “a quarter dollar that is 0.955 inch in diameter and weights 5.67 grams” and is made of a copper and nickel alloy (5 U.S.C. 5112(a)(3) and (b)).

In addition to specific denominations, size, and metallic content, Congress also requires that certain design elements

be present on coinage. This includes specific words such as “Liberty,” or “E Pluribus Unum,” as well as which president appears on any given coin. For example, pursuant to law, all nickels must include the image of Thomas Jefferson on the obverse (5 U.S.C. 5112(d)(1)) and all pennies must show an image of Abraham Lincoln (P.L. 109-145).

For other aspects of coin design not specified by Congress, the Secretary of the Treasury is authorized to change the design or die of a coin only once within 25 years of the first adoption of the design features for that coin (31 USC 5112(d)(1), unless Congress specifies otherwise.

Recent Special Coinage Programs

In recent years, Congress has enacted legislation to change the design of circulating coins to honor the states, national parks, and former presidents. These design changes were specified by law and mandated the issuance of more than one coin design in a given year.

State Quarters

From 1999 to 2008, the U.S. Mint issued five different quarters each year with designs on the reverse side, which are emblematic of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and the territories—Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, and the Northern Mariana Islands (31 U.S.C. 5112 (1)(1)(A)). Coins were issued in the order in which states entered the Union, beginning with Delaware and ending with Hawaii. Coin designs were chosen by the Secretary of the Treasury after consultation with the state officials, the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts, and the Citizens Coinage Advisory Commission. Quarter design reflected important events and symbols from each state, but were prohibited from containing images of any person, living or dead. **Figure 2** shows the first state quarter—Delaware—and the last state quarter—Hawaii.

Figure 2. Delaware and Hawaii Quarters Reverse



Source: U.S. Mint, *50 State Quarter Report: 10 Years of Honoring Our Nation’s History and Heritage*.

America the Beautiful Quarters

As a follow up to the popularity of the 50 State Quarter program, in 2010 the America the Beautiful Quarter

program was launched following congressional authorization. The American the Beautiful quarters are a 12-year initiative that will create 56 different quarter reverses to honor national parks and other national sites in each state, territory, and the District of Columbia. Each quarter in the series will honor a single site within the state or territory selected by the Secretary of the Treasury in consultation with the Secretary of the Interior and the state's governor (31 U.S.C. 5112(t)(3)(1)(i)). **Figure 3** shows the 2016 America the Beautiful Quarter reverse images.

Figure 3. 2016 America the Beautiful Quarters



Source: U.S. Mint "America the Beautiful Quarter Program."

Notes: The 2016 Quarter are the Shawnee National Forest (IL), the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park (KY), Harpers Ferry National Historical Park (WV), Theodore Roosevelt National Park (ND), and Fort Moultrie at Fort Sumter National Memorial (SC).

Following the conclusion of the American the Beautiful Quarter program in 2021, the Secretary of the Treasury is authorized, but not required, to mint a second round of quarters honoring a national park or other site in each state (31 U.S.C. 5112(t)(7)(B)). If the Secretary does not continue the program then the quarter-dollar's obverse will continue to contain an image of George Washington, while the reverse will "contain an image of General Washington crossing the Delaware River prior to the Battle of Trenton" (31 U.S.C. 5112(t)(8)(A)).

Presidential Dollars

In the 109th Congress (2005-2006), Congress authorized the redesign of the \$1 coin to honor past presidents of the United States (31 U.S.C. 5112(n)). Beginning in 2007, each president who has been deceased for at least two years is honored with a \$1 coin. Consequently, Presidents Jimmy Carter, George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama have not been included in the presidential \$1 coin program. **Figure 4** shows the last three Presidential \$1 coin designs that were issued in 2016 for Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, and Ronald Reagan as well as the obverse of the coins, which feature the Statue of Liberty.

Figure 4. 2016 Presidential \$1 Coins



Source: U.S. Mint "Presidential \$1 Coins."

Following the conclusion of the presidential \$1 program, the design of the \$1 coin will revert to the "Sacagawea-design" \$1 coin (31 U.S.C. 5112(n)(9)).

Proposals for Future Special Coinage Programs

The presidential \$1 coin program ends in 2016 and unless renewed by the Secretary of the Treasury, the America the Beautiful Quarter program ends in 2021. Should Congress want to direct the mint to alter the design of circulating coinage in the future, legislation would be required. For example, in the 114th Congress (2015-2016), H.R. 6025 was introduced to authorize the redesign of the \$1 coin to honor "innovation[s], innovators, and pioneers from each state, the District of Columbia, and each territory," beginning in 2017. The coins would honor four significant innovations, innovators, or pioneers per year. Designs would be recommended by the governor or chief executive of each state, the territories, and the District of Columbia.

Should an act to redesign a particular type of coin, become law, the Secretary of the Treasury would incorporate the specified design preferences to reflect congressional direction.

For more information on commemorative coins, see CRS In Focus IF10262, *Commemorative Coins: An Overview*, by Jacob R. Straus; and CRS Report R44623, *Commemorative Coins: Background, Legislative Process, and Issues for Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus. For more information on currency see,

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