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Sponsorship and Cosponsorship of House Bills

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Summary

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.

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. These letters are so called after the salutation with which they begin.

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 at the time of introduction.⁴ 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.⁵ The constitutional authority statement is not required to accompany the introduction of simple or concurrent resolutions, neither of which can become law.

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 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.

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.

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>. See also the Speaker’s “Dear Colleague” letter of April 6, 2020, at <https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/4620>. 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 for download on HouseNet, at <https://housenet.house.gov/sites/housenet.house.gov/files/forms/Add-Cosponsor-Form.pdf>.

⁴ Constitutional authority forms are available for download on the website of the Office of Legislative Counsel at <http://legcoun.house.gov/members/HOLC/Resources/casform.pdf>.

⁵ House Legislative Counsel provides guidance on meeting this requirement at http://legcoun.house.gov/members/HOLC/Resources/const_auth_statement.html.

A sponsor may not reclaim 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](https://www.congress.gov), an online database of legislative activity.⁹ House Rule XII, clause 7(b) allows a bill to be reprinted if 20 or

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 14, 2020), p. H4371. 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 House 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. Another option is provided for in Section 3(x) of H.Res. 8, the rules package for the 117th Congress (2021-2022), which establishes a process managed by the House Clerk for Members to publicly register their support for individual Senate-passed measures that have been received by the House.

⁹ While amendments generally do not obtain cosponsors, a protocol of the House Rules Committee prioritizes for floor consideration any amendment submitted to the Rules Committee that lists 20 or more cosponsors from each party on a form prepared by the Rules Committee and available online at <https://rules.house.gov/rules-and-resources/rules-committee-protocol>.

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, 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 making this request on the House floor. Removal initiated by a cosponsor does not require the unanimous consent of the House.

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 are prohibited from having cosponsors.¹¹

Rules first adopted by the House in the 116th Congress and reaffirmed in the 117th Congress (2021-2022) 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 House Clerk to put the measure on this calendar.¹² 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.¹³

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” 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.¹⁴

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

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

¹¹ 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.

¹² A “legislative” day is a period of time that starts when the House convenes following an adjournment and ends when the chamber next adjourns. The House normally adjourns at the end of each day, so in most cases a “legislative” day corresponds with a “calendar” day (a standard 24-hour period).

¹³ As with other standing rules, the terms of clause 7 of House Rule XV may be modified as applied to a particular measure by House adoption of a special rule from the Rules Committee. Additional information on the Consensus Calendar can be found in CRS Report R46485, *The House Consensus Calendar: Establishment, Principal Features, and Practice in the 116th Congress (2019-2020)*, by Jane A. Hudiburg.

¹⁴ See CRS Report R44768, *“Dear Colleague” Letters in the House of Representatives: Past Practices and Issues for Congress*, by Jacob R. Straus.

system for distributing “Dear Colleagues” electronically was implemented in the 110th Congress.¹⁵

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 that his or her name 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 House Clerk for publication in the *Congressional Record*.

Author Information

Mark J. Oleszek
Analyst on Congress and the Legislative Process

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