Constitutional Record: Its Production, Distribution, and Accessibility

Mildred Amer
Specialist in American Government
Government and Finance Division

The Congressional Record is the most widely recognized published account of the debates and activities in Congress. The Record often reflects the intent of Congress in enacting legislation. This fact sheet is one of a series on the legislative process. Please see [http://www.crs.gov/products/guides/guidehome/shtml] for more information on the legislative process.

The Constitution mandates that each house shall keep and publish a journal of its proceedings. Accordingly, the House and Senate Journals, which are summaries of floor proceedings, are the official accounts of congressional proceedings, but the Record is better known and the most useful.

The Record is published daily by the Government Printing Office (GPO) when either or both houses of Congress are in session. It is brought by GPO to the congressional post offices for early morning delivery to the offices of Members and committees.

Each day’s Record contains an account of the previous day’s congressional activity. However, if a session extends past midnight, the Record is usually published in two parts with the first part printed the following day, and action after midnight included in the next day’s edition. Copies of the Record are also available for Representatives inside the House chamber and for Senators on their desks in the Senate chamber. Extra copies may be obtained from the House Document Room (B18, Ford House Office), the Senate Library (B15, Russell Senate Office Building), and the Senate Document Room (B04, Hart Senate Office Building).

The Record, which averages about 200 pages a day, consists of four sections: the proceedings of the House; the proceedings of the Senate; the Extensions of Remarks, containing matter not part of the spoken debates and proceedings; and the Daily Digest of activity in Congress. It does not contain any text of committee proceedings.

Located at the back of the Record, the Daily Digest of activity in Congress is a key to using a daily Record. Separately for the House and Senate, it contains summary information on chamber action the preceding day, including measures introduced, reported, debated, and passed, and appointments made. It also summarizes committee activities, provides the time and location of committee and subcommittee meetings scheduled for the day the Record is delivered, and gives the time and date of the next
convening of the House and Senate. The Daily Digest is prepared by the Daily Digest Offices in the House and Senate (House, 5-7497, and Senate, 4-2658)

The House and Senate each have teams of official reporters of debate who are present on the floor and responsible for taking down everything spoken and all business transacted. In addition, they make copies available to Members and staff to refine the text of speeches submitted for publication or words spoken in debate. The offices of the official reporters also assist Members and staff in determining if material they wish to insert in the Record will adhere to the two-page limit. If the material exceeds two pages, Members are required to announce the cost to print it. All manuscripts for submission in the Record must be returned to the official reporters of debate in a timely fashion to insure publication the following morning. Questions regarding material placed in the Record can be directed to the House official reporters of debate at 5-5621 or the Senate reporters at 4-3152.

Actual signatures are required of those Members who wish to insert undelivered remarks in the Senate section of the Record known as “Additional Statements” or in the House portion known as “Extensions of Remarks.” These statements must be submitted by Members or their staffs either at the dais or in the respective cloakrooms in the House or Senate.

The Record is also available online through GPO and the Library of Congress. It can be searched either by full text for a certain date, by Member of Congress, or by topic. The Web site through GPO is [http://www.access.gpo.gov]. Once at the site, the user should click on GPO Access and then the Congressional Record, which is available from 1994 to the present. The Web site at the Library of Congress is available for the general public through Thomas [http://thomas.loc.gov] and for congressional staff through the Legislative Information System [http://www.congress.gov]. At these sites, there are options for searching the full text of the Record from the 101st through 108th Congresses.

There are two editions of the Record, a daily one and a permanent one. Technical and parliamentary corrections and changes in the pagination are the major differences in these two versions of the Record. Through the 104th Congress, after the conclusion of each two-year Congress, GPO has published the multivolume permanent, hardbound editions, together with an index for that Congress. However, a reduction in the paper version of the permanent Record has been mandated by Congress, and future, permanent editions of the Record will be on CD-Rom.

The Joint Committee on Printing, composed of Members of the Senate Rules and Administration and House Administration Committees, directs the printing of the Record by GPO. The committee controls the arrangement and style of the Record. Title 44 of the U.S. Code contains laws relating to the publication and distribution of the Record. Questions on Congressional Record policy should be directed to the Joint Committee on Printing at 5-8281. Since this committee does not have legislative authority, any resolution affecting policy would be considered by the House Administration Committee or Senate Rules and Administration Committee.

For more specific information on using the Record, consult CRS Report 98-265, A Users Guide to the Congressional Record.