

CONGRESSIONAL FELLOWSHIP PROGRAM

A “Hill Speak” Primer: Explaining the Legislative Jargon of Congress

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Nearly every profession and technical field has its own jargon composed of specialized vocabulary and shared idioms. For example, computer programmers have Java and PHP, military service members have MREs and MPs, and television reporters have shots and hits. French philosopher Condillac observed in 1782 that “every science requires a special language because every science has its own ideas.” Of course, political science is no different, as long-time *New York Times* columnist William Safire demonstrated in his celebrated dictionaries of political language (Safire 2008). Political affairs are infused with colorful and historical turns of phrase and anecdotes.

One of the first things that APSA Congressional Fellows realize upon joining a personal or committee office is the amount and scope of jargon and slang that are used on Capitol Hill. Aides use this shorthand to smooth conversations and negotiate the pitfalls of working in a politically charged environment. Sentences are often composed of a series of slang terms: a “staffer” will try to get “face time” with his or her “boss” so that he or she can get “sign off” on the “red line” “language” and attach the bill to the “chairman’s mark” or the next “germane” “vehicle.” Jargon is such a part of the culture that an expression for the jargon itself has sprung up over time—“hill speak.”

At first glance, hill speak makes Capitol Hill feel like a world apart. Dorothy Shea, a State Department foreign service officer who recently completed an assignment as a Pearson Fellow to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, compared working in Congress to working in a different country with its own unique culture, calling it the “Federal Republic of the Hill”:

I’m a DC native, so I know the District well. I even live on Capitol Hill. Yet, if I’d been blindfolded en route to my first (and subsequent) days of work on the Hill, I could have easily have mistaken my new environs for a foreign posting. I’m working on many of

the same issues that I have worked on at the Department, but I’m a world apart. Life is so different at this end of Constitution Avenue. (Shea 2010)

From the ubiquitous BlackBerry mobile phones to Senate bean soup and gray and black suits, Congress certainly has its own culture, and hill speak is its native language.

As a scholar of political communication, I understand the power of language and communication to advance an argument, create a new understanding, or define an issue. When it comes to “hill speak,” jargon principally allows for more efficient and effective conversations and adds color to what is often a grueling job. These terms are a significant part of Congressional history and evolve or fall out of favor when they are no longer useful. Importantly, Capitol Hill jargon also separates those in-the-know people with Washington experience from outsiders who may be unaware of the intricacies of the argot. Thus, understanding and correctly using some of the basic elements of the lingo can establish credibility with insiders so the initiated can act like locals.

While excellent books on political idioms do exist (e.g., Safire 2008, Dickson and Clancey 1993), there is not a manual of the working language used by those involved in the legislative process. In an attempt to pull back this curtain, this article defines and describes some of the most common terms used by aides, journalists, and lobbyists. There are many more terms that are not included on this list—Washington will not run out of acronyms anytime soon. But many of the Washington terms are limited to one issue area. For example, an aide working on the Commerce Committee will frequently refer to N.I.S.T. (the National Institute of Standards and Technology), but others outside this narrow area will be unfamiliar with the expression. To avoid confusion, such specialized terms are not included here.

Approps: Short for “Appropriations Committee.”

My boss: The ubiquitous term staffers use to refer to the member for whom they work. Because aides rarely voice their own opinions, they are constantly expressing the views of “their boss.” *Usage: Staffer 1: “My boss would really like to see changes in the language in section five.” Staffer 2: “That section is my boss’ number-one priority. Would your boss be willing to compromise on that?”*

Briefing book: A majority of a staffer’s time is spent writing and organizing these binders full of notes, memos, position papers, news articles, and talking points. Every senator or member has a different style and format for these books, but the books generally contain any information that is necessary to attend a hearing or meeting, give a speech, or make a decision about which way to vote on a contentious issue.

Casework: Assistance provided to constituents who run into difficulties with a federal agency or the federal government. Common examples include assisting constituents with Social Security benefits, Veterans’ Administration issues, or immigration and political asylum concerns. The vast majority of casework is handled by staffers in state or district offices, and most members have several dedicated caseworkers in their home offices.

Chairman’s mark: A bill proposed by a committee chair to be considered by the full committee. These bills are usually the work of committee staff and express the preferred positions of the chair. *Usage: “Instead of wasting our time on our bill, let’s try to get some amendments on the Chairman’s mark that is likely to move.”*

Cloakroom: Republican and Democratic cloakrooms adjacent to the House and Senate chambers serve as gathering places for party members to discuss chamber business privately, wait between votes, make a phone call, or simply get some downtime. Cloakroom staff field hundreds of ques-

tions each day about the floor schedule, such as “What is up after this vote?” “When is the next vote?” and “When is adjournment expected?”

Congressional Budget Office (CBO): The Congressional Budget Office analyzes and scores budget-related bills and supplies economic forecasts. *Usage:* “We need to tweak the language because the CBO score came back too high.”

Dear colleague letter (D.C.): A formal letter sent out in bulk in which one member asks another to support or co-sponsor a bill. D.C. letters have a long history in Congress and are a formal way to publicize a new piece of legislation, solicit support, or announce an upcoming congressional event. *Usage:* “After the bill is dropped, we should put together a D.C. letter to try and get cosponsors.”

Face time: Time with a senator or member. Staffers rarely act independently and are always in touch with their immediate supervisor and, ultimately, their bosses. So before moving forward on a legislative topic or issue, staffers must find time on their member’s strictly controlled schedule. For a low priority issue, it may take days or weeks to get face time, and staffers are frequently bumped off the schedule for votes or breaking events.

The floor: The House or Senate chamber. When a senator or member is in the chamber, staffers will say that he or she is “on the floor.” *Usage:* “She is running late for the hearing because she is still on the floor for votes.”

Germane: Relevant or appropriate. In the House, amendments must be germane to the original bill to be considered (unless permitted as an exception to the rule). The Senate has no germaneness rule, except in limited situations such as general appropriations bills, budget measures, and bills under cloture.

Hideaway: Personal, unmarked offices in the Capitol originally assigned to senior senators, but now available to less senior senators after recent renovations. Most are conveniently located near the Senate floor.

The hideaway location of an individual senator is a closely held secret, as most of these rooms lack names or signs on the doors.

The Hill: An insider’s name for Congress. Staffers work on the Hill, constituents may go to the Hill, and activists may take their case to the Hill. *Usage:* “Life on the Hill sure can be hazardous to your health!”

Language: The specific wording of a piece of legislation. The overall outline or concept of a bill may have broad support, but different legislators or interest groups may be opposed to the specific language. *Usage:* “Have you had a chance to look at the language yet? Do you have any changes?”

Legislative assistant (L.A.): A policy staff person who is responsible for several legislative issues or fields (usually referred to as an “issue portfolio”), such as energy, national security, agriculture, or education. L.A.s read and write legislation, research

deal of political jostling and maneuvering amongst members and staff before mark-ups, and bills may be abruptly withdrawn from the mark-up to allow members additional time to reach compromises and avoid public squabbling.

One-pager: A one-page position paper that efficiently summarizes a member or outside group’s standpoint. Before a bill is introduced, staff will prepare a one-page issue brief that provides bulleted background on the issue, summarizes the key points of the legislation, and may include background talking points in support of the bill. When used by advocacy groups, these are also called “leave behinds” because they are given to—or left behind with—a staffer at the end of a meeting. *Usage:* “Your boss’ jobs bill looks interesting—do you have a one-pager on it?”

Outside groups: A catch-all term for the various stakeholders attempting to influence the legislative process. The term can refer to affected businesses, public interest groups, unions, religious groups, state leaders, federal agencies, or other advocacy groups. *Usage:*

“Where are the outside groups on this? Do you have any letters of support for your bill?”

Optics: How a situation is superficially perceived, usually by constituents or the news media. This buzzword is growing in popularity and is used anytime an elected official is worried more about public relations and image-making than substance. *Usage:* “I know that was the right vote, but the optics are all wrong—it is exactly the opposite message we want to send.”

Package: A collection of bills or proposals with a common goal, such as an economic stimulus package or a small business package. *Usage:* “What are the chances of getting my boss’ language into the health care package?”

Presser: A press conference involving a member.

Proxy vote: A vote cast by a staffer in committee when a senator or member is unable to attend. *Usage:* “Is our boss going to make it to the mark-up this morning, or do I need to be

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bills, prepare for hearings, and meet with constituents and outside groups.

Legislative correspondent (L.C.): A policy staff person who drafts letters to constituents who have contacted the elected official to express their concerns.

Legislative director (L.D.): The staff person who oversees the legislative agenda for the office and makes recommendations on policy issues. The L.D. manages the legislative assistants and legislative correspondents.

March madness: A busy month in Congressional offices in which large numbers of constituents who are in town for conferences journey to the Hill to advocate for their individual causes.

Mark-up: The committee meeting held to review the text of a bill before reporting it out of committee. Contrary to what the name suggests, committee members do not directly edit the text, but can offer and vote on amendments. There is a great

ready to proxy?"

Quorum call: A procedure used in both chambers to bring sufficient senators and members to the floor to conduct business. In the Senate, any senator who has the floor can force a quorum call by suggesting the absence of a quorum. This tactic is usually used to pause the proceedings if the next senator in line to speak is delayed, or to negotiate on or off the floor. If a true quorum is called to bring senators to the floor, it is known as a "live" quorum call. In the House, quorums are usually restricted to when a vote is taking place, and they are called when a member makes a point of order that a quorum is not present. If a majority of members fail to respond, the House must adjourn until enough members are in attendance to constitute a quorum.

A quote: A sentence or two by a senator or member that will be featured in a news release and hopefully picked up by the news media. Also called a "sound bite." *Usage:* "I need a quote to put into this release—do you have any ideas?"

Rider: A clause added to a bill that is often secondary to the central purpose of the legislation. A rider may be added to popular, sure-to-pass legislation or required legislation such as an appropriations bill or continuing resolution. Alternatively, an objectionable rider may be attached to moving legislation in an attempt to "bring down" the legislation or ensure that the president will veto the bill. These objectionable riders are known as "poison pills" or "killer amendments" because they are likely to terminate the program or force the bill's sponsors to endorse an unsavory idea. Since the Senate has no germaneness rule, any bill that is likely to pass can serve as a vehicle for other unrelated legislation. When a moving bill such as defense budget legislation is overloaded with riders, it is pejoratively called a "Christmas tree bill."

Red line: A revised draft of a bill containing proposed deletions, changes, and additions. The name comes from the red lines that are used to cross out offending sections in the word-processing software. It is common for other members, outside groups, or lobby-

ists to prepare red line drafts that specify their desired edits.

Senate swamp: An area located on the grass across the drive from the east Senate steps of the Capitol near the corner of Constitution and Delaware Avenues NE that is frequently used by senators for outdoor press events.

Sign off on: To approve. Often, before a staffer can agree to a request or make a statement, they must "get sign off" from their senator or member, chief of staff, or legislative director. Most congressional offices have strict rules and procedures for sign offs, so navigating this process can take up a great deal of staffers' time and energy.

Staffer: Anyone on the staff of a member or committee. Most staffers shun the limelight and prefer to work in anonymity. **Study bill:** A piece of legislation that proposes an issue be researched. If a member cannot get support for his or her bill, he or she may rewrite it to study the issue instead of changing the law. While almost no one wants to put forth a study bill, it may be the only available possibility and may result in a favorable report that can be used to move forward the original bill in the next Congress.

Unanimous consent (U.C.): A timesaving agreement that allows noncontroversial and uncontested matters to pass. Because the Senate has almost no limit on debate, unanimous consent is necessary for the Senate to function. A single senator can—and often does—stop a bill or nominee, so staffers try to work out unanimous consent before a proposal reaches the floor. The Senate "hotlines" a bill when it is ready to be considered under a unanimous consent agreement. Under the hotline process, the Senate cloakrooms notify senators of upcoming bills that may be considered under unanimous consent to provide them with a final opportunity to object. *Usage:* "Since no one is against this bill, let's try and U.C. it as soon as possible."

Vehicle: A bill that is likely to move through Congress and may be considered for riders. *Usage:* "What moving vehicles in the next few

months could we try and attach this amendment to?"

Vote-a-rama: An extended sequence of back-to-back votes in the Senate. Under the rules, debate is limited for budget resolutions and reconciliation bills and the Senate vote on final passage of a budget resolution or reconciliation bill until all amendments have been "disposed of" (or voted on). Accordingly, senators offer numerous amendments to budget resolutions and reconciliation bills because they know they will get a quick vote on their amendment. During a vote-a-rama, each amendment is considered for 10 minutes and voted on until all amendments have been considered, a process that can last more than 30 hours. Unlike the usual voting routine of a handful of votes each day, during this time, all 100 senators are on the floor, in the cloakrooms, or right outside the chamber for hours on end and often late into the night. Of course, this means staffers are nearby, briefing their bosses and making vote recommendations. Vote-aramas usually come at the end of a difficult legislative battle, and everyone is exhausted and irritable.

What do you hear . . . ?: A common inquiry used to ask about the tone of legislative and political currents on the Hill. This address is most often used by activists or lobbyists who are trying to read the political situation and gather information that they can take back to their clients. *Usage:* "What do you hear about the chances of your boss' energy bill getting floor time this month?" ■

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