

# WHAT IS A DISCHARGE PETITION

## A Simple Guide for Citizens

### The Big Picture

In the House of Representatives, most bills must pass through a committee before the full House can vote on them. But sometimes, a committee refuses to act – whether because of politics, disagreement, or simple delay. A discharge petition is a tool that allows representatives to force a bill out of committee and bring it to the House floor for a vote – even if committee leaders do not want it to move. It’s Congress’s version of: “Let’s bring this straight to the full House – no more waiting.”

### Why do Discharge Petitions exist?

They were created to prevent a small number of committee chairs or party leaders from having total control over which bills receive a vote. Discharge petitions help ensure that important bills can’t be buried forever and that a majority of the House can still act, even when leadership opposes the bill. While rarely successful, their mere threat can pressure leadership to bring a bill forward.

### How Discharge Petitions work:

#### Discharge Petition Filed

Any member of the House may file the petition to bring a stalled bill directly to the floor, circumventing committees where most bills may never get a hearing.

#### 218 Signatures are Required

A majority of the House must sign the petition for it to succeed. Members must sign in person and publicly; their names are recorded for everyone to see.

#### Bill Discharged

Once 218 signatures are reached, the bill is pulled out of committee and put on the House’s Discharge Calendar. The House may then hold a vote to bring the bill to the floor for both debate and a final vote.

#### Leadership Can’t Block It

Once a petition reaches 218 signatures, House leaders must allow the process to move forward. This makes it one of the few tools rank-and-file members can use to bypass leadership.

### Why do Discharge Petitions matter?

Discharge petitions are rare, but powerful. They shape Congress in several key ways by empowering the majority of members (not just leadership), forcing action on issues that might otherwise be ignored, influencing negotiations, and protecting democracy by ensuring that nay bill with majority support can get a vote. Even when they fail, they can draw national attention to an issue and signal that momentum exists within Congress.

#### References

Oleszek, Mark J., and James V. Saturno. 2023. “Discharge Procedure in the House | Congress.gov | Library of Congress.” Congress.gov. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R45920#fn3>.

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