

UNDERSTANDING THE DISCHARGE PETITION

A discharge petition is a little-known but powerful tool in the U.S. House of Representatives that allows a majority of Members to force a bill out of committee and onto the House floor for a vote. Normally, House leadership and committee chairs decide which bills get considered, which often means legislation can sit untouched for months or even years. A discharge petition creates a way around that bottleneck. If a bill has been stuck in committee for at least 30 legislative days, any Member of Congress can file a discharge petition with the House Clerk.

From that moment, the petition is placed on the House floor where Members can publicly sign it. If 218 Members (a full majority of the House) add their names, then after a brief waiting period, the House can hold a vote to “discharge” the committee and bring the bill to the floor for debate and a final vote. Because signatures are public and leadership often opposes being bypassed, Members risk political consequences for signing. That’s why discharge petitions are rare and usually signal strong bipartisan support, major frustration with leadership, or both.

Even though hundreds of discharge petitions have been filed throughout history, only a small fraction have ever succeeded. But when they do succeed, they can have major impact. A notable example came in 2015, when Congressman Adam Kinzinger and a bipartisan coalition used a discharge petition to reauthorize the Export-Import Bank. After House leadership declined to schedule a vote, Kinzinger secured enough signatures from Republicans and Democrats to reach the 218 threshold, and the petition forced the stalled bill to the floor.

A more recent example occurred in 2025, when Congressman Thomas Massie filed a discharge petition to force a vote on releasing the Epstein investigation files after House leadership did not move the bill forward. Massie’s effort reached the required majority of signatures, triggering floor action and once again showing that, even in a polarized Congress, Members can use the discharge process to demand transparency and accountability.

In short, a discharge petition is one of the few mechanisms that prevents small groups of leaders from quietly burying legislation. It empowers the majority of elected representatives to insist that important issues receive the public debate and vote they deserve.

