

VIEWPOINT

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Frankly, it's Outrageous

The chairman of the Senate Rules Committee is justifiably indignant about the gross abuse of the franking privilege by members of Congress.

The cost to taxpayers of Capitol Hill's "free" mail is \$111 million this year, more than double that of five years ago. Sen. Charles Mathias, R-Md., the Rules Committee chairman, estimates it will jump to \$144 million next year.

Even as he complained, the Senate's rules of courtesy kept Mathias from naming the worse offenders. The Senate does not release the costs of mailings for each lawmaker. Nor is it possible to obtain them under the Freedom of Information Act, which requires other government agencies to disclose unclassified information but from which Congress conveniently exempted itself.

Someone leaked the figures in 1982 and it turned out that Sen. John Heinz, R-Pa., was the champion mailer that year, sending 15 million pieces at a cost of about \$2.25 million. That was outdone last year by an unidentified senator who sent out mailings costing \$3.8 million.

Behind this abuse is politics. The franking privilege enables members of Congress to inundate constituents with newsletters, surveys and other material, which increases their name recognition, enables them to blow their own horns

and vastly enhances their chances of being re-elected.

Mathias suggested that no free mail should come out of a senator's office except in reply to a constituent's question or request. That would reduce the outgoing mail by about 96 percent, but don't expect that sensible recommendation to be adopted.

At the very least, the cost of each member's franked mail should be made public. It is, after all, being paid for by the taxpayers. If a senator is going to use his franking privilege to manipulate public opinion, the voters have a right to know how much it's costing them.

There also ought to be a requirement that all congressional newsletters and other franked propaganda must have printed on them, in large letters in a prominent location: **Compiled, printed and distributed at taxpayers' expense.**

VILLAGE ADVERTISER COMMENTARY:

Every registered voter receives from his congressman mail that bears, instead of postage, a facsimile of the signature of a senator or house member. Every such piece of mail comes from a person who is abusing the franking privilege. That person, upon taking office, swears to represent the best interests of his constituents. Who among us believes our best interests, rather than those of the individuals we elect to represent us, are being served in Congress today? Only the ingenuous. Only the naive.