

WASHINGTON (AP) - Despite low approval ratings and hard feelings from last year's elections, Democrats and Republicans in the House are reaching out for an approximately \$4,400 pay raise that would increase their salaries to almost \$170,000.

The cost-of-living raise endorsed Wednesday evening gets lawmakers back on track for automatic pay raises after a fight between the parties last year and again in January killed the pay increase due this year. That was the first interruption of the annual congressional pay boost in seven years.

The blowup came after Democrats last year fulfilled a campaign promise to deny themselves more pay until Congress raised the minimum wage. Delays in the minimum wage bill cost every lawmaker about \$3,100 this year.

On a 244-181 vote Wednesday, Democrats and Republicans alike killed a bid by Reps. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, and Lee Terry, R-Neb., to get a direct vote to block the COLA, which is automatically awarded unless lawmakers vote to block it. The Senate has not indicated when it will deal with a similar measure.

As part of an ethics bill in 1989, Congress gave up its ability to accept pay for speeches and made annual cost-of-living pay increases automatic unless the lawmakers voted otherwise.

The annual vote on the pay hike comes on an obscure procedural move - instead of a direct up-or-down vote - and Democratic and GOP leaders each delivered a majority of their members to shut off the move to block the pay hike.

This year's vote was made ticklish by last year's battle. Republicans said Democrats broke a promise not to use the pay raise issue against GOP lawmakers in campaign ads and therefore were, generally speaking, more reluctant to supply votes.

Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., and Minority Whip Roy Blunt, R-Mo., worked the floor during the vote to make sure there was relative balance between the warring parties in delivering votes. Working through Blunt, Hoyer forced more than a dozen Republicans to switch their votes in support of accepting the raise, including Reps. Mike Pence and Dan Burton of Indiana and Fred Upton, Dave Camp and Vernon Ehlers of Michigan.

Most members support the pay raise as a means of retaining experienced lawmakers and of making sure that Congress is not simply dominated by wealthy people. Many lawmakers maintain homes both in the expensive Washington housing market and back in their districts. On most days, they meet with lobbyists making far more than they do.

"Every member has some obligation to the institution for the compensation to, as much as possible, keep pace with inflation," Blunt told reporters Wednesday.

"I don't think this is the right time for members of Congress to be allowing the pay raise to go through without even an up-or-down vote," said Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah. "We need to show the American people we are willing to make some sacrifices ... that we recognize there's a struggle for some in today's economy."

The exact figure for this year's cost of living adjustment has not been settled under a complicated formula that awards lawmakers a smaller pay raise than civil servants. But opponents of the congressional COLA estimated a pay increase this year of 2.7 percent, or \$4,460.

Senators and representatives presently make \$165,200 a year, with a handful of leaders such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., earning more.

The pay raise would also apply to the vice president - who is president of the Senate - congressional leaders and Supreme Court justices.

This year, Vice President Dick Cheney, Pelosi and Chief Justice John Roberts receive \$212,100. Associate justices receive \$203,000. House and Senate party leaders get \$183,500.

President Bush's salary of \$400,000 is unaffected by the legislation.

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