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Congress Back Then: The Presidential Wage



by K. Daniel Glover
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As head of the Congressional Accountability Project, Gary Ruskin is never shy about questioning the actions and motives of federal officials, so his testimony at a May 24 House subcommittee hearing on presidential pay was par for the watchdog course.

The target of his ire: a bipartisan proposal, one backed by congressional leaders, to boost the presidential wage from $200,000 a year to $400,000. Ruskin insisted that no president needs the extra money (except perhaps to pay legal bills). And even worse, he said, the people who want to hike the nation's chief executive pay have an ulterior motive. "[T]his effort … is driven by members of Congress and federal judges who wish to lift the presidential salary cap" to justify an increase in their own pay.

To the few current lawmakers who were in Congress three decades ago, Ruskin's cynicism may have sounded like a broken record for a reason other than the reputation of the messenger: His gripe about lawmakers seeking political cover echoes that of Sen. John Williams (R-DE) 30 years before. Williams was one of the few opponents of the last presidential pay hike in 1969.

History may explain Ruskin and Williams' cynicism, though, for the lesson of history on the pay of elected officials is this: Congressional pay increases foment controversy and revolt at the polls; presidential pay boosts, no matter how large, seem to stir little public interest. The presidential pay hike of 1969, furthermore, was followed later the same year by raises in legislative and judicial pay.

Oh, to be president!

Until belated enactment of the Constitution's 24-word 27th Amendment in 1992, there were no hard-and-fast rules governing congressional pay. Congressional salaries have increased somewhat steadily, especially since the early 20th century -- but rarely without complaint from the voters.

Controversy, in fact, has been the rule of thumb since the first change in lawmakers' pay. When lawmakers raised their pay of $6 for each day of legislative duty to a flat $1,500 a year in 1815, the public's reaction was swift and harsh.

Voters in Georgia burned their representatives in effigy, Congressional Quarterly reported. Nine members resigned under pressure from the electorate, and most incumbents, including all in Ohio, Delaware and Vermont, lost their bids for re-election in 1816.

The public reacted much the same way in 1873. In the last hours of the 42nd Congress that year, lawmakers voted to double President Ulysses S. Grant's salary. But the inclusion of a 50% "salary grab" for lawmakers themselves, a raise that was retroactive by two years, sparked the public's outrage. Ninety-six of the 203 congressional seats changed hands in the 1874 election, which enabled Democrats to gain legislative control for the first time since the Civil War. The next Congress reversed the pay raise.

The presidential wage has triggered far less controversy, however, perhaps for good reason. First of all, presidential raises lack the stigma of self-interest. Sure, presidents must sign into law the bills that raise their pay, but duly elected representatives and senators with competing visions must act first.

Then there is the matter of a 48-word constitutional clause. Article II, Section 1 has prohibited an increase or decrease in the presidential salary during a president's elected tenure since the nation's beginning. That rule undoubtedly has discouraged regular wage increases, and indeed, there have been few.

The first president, George Washington, earned an annual salary of $25,000. Since those early days of the republic, Congress has boosted the pay of his successors only four times -- to $50,000 in 1873, to $75,000 in 1909, to $100,000 in 1949, and to the current $200,000 wage in 1969.

A top priority in 1969


AP Photo
Nixon was the last president to get a raise

Which brings us to the circumstances of the last presidential pay hike. Like the current proposal, the 1969 raise doubled the salary of the incoming president (Republican Richard M. Nixon). And also like the plan now on the congressional table, the last pay boost inspired little controversy.

Even though the economy was weakening at the time, congressional leaders had no qualms about the 100% raise. The bill was a top priority, in fact. It was numbered HR10, a number typically reserved for an issue atop the leadership agenda, and it became the first law of the 91st Congress. Lawmakers rushed to clear the bill so President Lyndon Johnson could sign it into law before Nixon's Jan. 20 inauguration.

During the limited House debate Jan. 6, leaders voiced their support with the same argument today's advocates of a presidential pay raise are using. A salary of $100,000, they said then, is just not enough for a man as important and influential as the president. And while the pay of lawmakers and others in government had nearly doubled in the previous 20 years, the president's had gone unchanged.

Rep. H.R. Gross (R-IA), whom *The Washington Post* dubbed a "dedicated watchdog of the public purse," argued that Nixon did not want the raise and that he could not "understand how Congress can increase an executive's salary 100% and yet talk about austerity and

frugality." But the House passed the bill by voice vote "with only a few audible no's," according to *The New York Times*.

Senate leaders likewise defended the measure Jan. 15. They noted that corporate executives, entertainers (Barbra Streisand) and professional athletes (Joe Namath) earned far more than the president. And even with a pre-tax salary of $200,000, they added, the president would garner take-home pay of only $78,500.

Williams' concerns that an increase in the presidential salary would trigger a wave of salary hikes -- for federal employees, for the military and even for private industry -- went unheeded. The Senate passed the bill by voice vote, and Johnson signed it into law Jan. 17.

A question of timing

Coincidentally or not, Johnson unveiled his final federal budget just hours before the Jan. 15 Senate vote to raise the president's pay, and in that budget, he proposed a series of other raises. They included pay boosts of nearly 42% for lawmakers (from $30,000 to $42,500), 32% for the vice president and House Speaker (from $42,500 to $62,500) and 15% for other congressional leaders (from $42,000 to $49,500).

The increases for lawmakers took effect automatically 30 days later, thanks to a law Congress passed in 1964 in an attempt to shield lawmakers from votes to raise their own pay. And while the pay hikes for the vice president and congressional leaders created more controversy in the spring and summer -- lawmakers who had opposed the automatic congressional raised used the bill to try to reverse that decision -- they became law (retroactive to March 1) on Sept. 15.

The law that allowed the automatic congressional raise in 1969 no longer exists, but another one that grants members an automatic cost-of-living adjustment is on the books. (Members used it to raise their pay in 1998.) So with the economy booming and no significant opposition to a presidential raise in sight, the only question seems to be whether Congress again will seize this opportunity to boost the salaries of top government officials across the board, as it did in 1969.

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Related Links

The witness list from the House subcommittee hearing on presidential pay includes a link to the opening statement of Rep. Stephen Horn (R-CA). In addition to Ruskin's testimony, statements of the following witnesses also can be read: Donald Simon of Common Cause, Robin A. Ferracone of the American Compensation Association, and compensation consultants Jane K. Weizmann and David A. Hofrichter. A *Washington Post* special report details the specifics of the "quiet raise" lawmakers gave themselves in 1997.



Is the current presidential salary sufficient? Why or why not? How much should presidents, congressmen and federal judges be paid?