



# Members of Congress haven't had a raise in years

Jesse Rifkin, USA TODAY 4:13 p.m. EDT August 15, 2013

*Lawmakers' paychecks buy less than they did in the 1990s.*



(Photo: Paul Singer, USA TODAY)

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WASHINGTON — Haven't had a raise in a while? Well, neither has your member of Congress.

This month, congressional salaries slid to their lowest inflation-adjusted levels since December 1990.

When congressional approval ratings are at historic lows, congressional pay — \$174,000 for rank-and-file senators and House members — may seem high. But some argue that shrinking paychecks for public service perpetuates a political culture where mostly the rich can afford to serve in office.

Members of Congress have to maintain households in two locations, one being Washington, one of the most expensive housing markets in the country even for rentals.

### STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Senators and House members earn \$174,000 a year; figure hasn't changed since 2009
- Congress keeps voting to block its own pay raises
- Though pay is stagnant, wealth of members of Congress has risen

"It's always shocking to see members of Congress sleeping in their offices," says Brad Fitch, president and CEO of the Congressional Management Foundation. "I know one who turned their office couch into a bed and their file cabinet into a laundry bin."

"The pay is adequate but not extravagant," agrees Norm Ornstein, resident scholar at American Enterprise Institute. "It's hard to make that case to most Americans. But in Washington, you're competing for housing with second-year associates at law firms who are already making the same salary as you."

Since 1992, congressional pay has not kept up with inflation. To keep up, pay would have to be closer to \$219,000, according to a June report by the Congressional Research Service.

By law, Congress obtains an annual automatic pay adjustment, equivalent to the prior year's average private sector wage change. However, the raise can't be a higher percentage than for other federal employees.

Congress can vote to delay or deny this raise and has done so five times since the last increase in 2009, most recently in January of this year. If each of those increases had gone into effect, congressional pay would today be 5.5% higher, still less than inflation.

While lawmakers' relative pay is declining, their wealth is increasing: Many in Congress have vast personal wealth. Since 1992, according to [Stanford University](#) and the [Center for Responsive Politics](#), congressional net worth increased

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significantly. Average American household net worth during that time [declined](#). Yet average net worth among freshman members first elected last November stands at more than a million dollars.

Thomas Mann says this is not coincidence.

"It's politically impossible to set salaries at a reasonable rate," says Mann, a congressional scholar at the Brookings Institution. "So it's not realistic to expect Congress to proportionally reflect America in terms of bartenders or construction workers. Especially to have two homes – one in Washington and one in the district – if you don't have personal wealth, you almost can't do it."

"Most would make far more money in their former jobs or the private sector," Fitch concurs. "Probably the only ones doing better than before are those who have been in public service their whole lives. That's definitely the minority, since most come from the legal or business worlds."

One factor causing this slide was the 1992 passage of the [27th Constitutional Amendment](#), which required that any pay adjustment Congress votes for itself would not take effect until after the next election. That way, representatives could not vote themselves a self-serving immediate pay raise and would have to risk that any such vote may benefit successors who may be ideological or political rivals.

Since ratification of the amendment, congressional pay has increased at less than half the rate of inflation. By contrast, in the five years before passage, congressional pay increased at almost twice the inflation rate.

Ornstein says lower congressional pay perpetuates a "revolving door" between Congress and K Street.



"When lobbying pays five to 10 times congressional pay, that is genuinely corrupting," Ornstein says. "Almost 50% of those leaving office [either due to retirement or being voted out] stay in Washington, compared to a blip a few decades ago."

Though denying themselves pay increases could earn members of Congress short-term brownie points with their constituents, the consequences could be damaging further out.

"If you continue to let the differential grow, at some point, Congress would be forced to make up for it with pay increases greater than inflation," Fitch predicts. "And there will be hell to pay."

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