

# Automatic pay hike for Congress? How about a pay cut? (Globe Gazette editorial)

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Chuck Grassley

If Iowa Sen. Charles Grassley had his way, the days of automatic raises for Congress would be a thing of the past.

Automatic raises? You read that correctly. Here's how it works. Congress, by law, gets the same pay increase as federal employees unless they vote to turn it down. Basically, they have to say they don't want a raise. What a sweet deal.

Grassley is part of a group of senators who want to hit the off switch on autoraises. According to a figure published on his website, this proposal could save taxpayers \$80 million over 10 years — a tiny drop in the vast bucket that is the U.S. budget, perhaps, but every million counts.

“It’s a slap in the face to do it when people across the country are tightening their own belts,” Grassley said in a story published July 10. “With the terrible deficit coming up, Congress has to set an example that we take the budget situation seriously.”

For the record, the 2010 salary for rank-and-file members of the Senate and House of Representatives is \$174,000. Leadership roles pay more. Individuals are free to turn down the raises if they choose. Some do. Raises have been voted down before and Congress is on a pay freeze for 2010 and 2011.

If you don’t think Grassley is going far enough, consider what Second District Rep. Dave Loebsack has proposed. Loebsack co-sponsored a resolution calling for Congress to get a 5 percent pay cut. If approved, the pay cut, worth about \$8,700, would be the first for Congress since the Great Depression.

“I was of modest means,” said Loebsack. “I will be fine even if I take a 5 percent cut. This is about recognizing the struggles people are facing.”

Good for him. And good for Grassley, too. It’s nice to see a little Iowa common sense on display at Capitol Hill. It’s difficult to think of a profession where an automatic raise would be acceptable let alone a job where a person decides how much they should be paid.

It’s easy to see why the mechanism is in place. Pay raises for lawmakers are a political hand grenade in even in the best economic conditions. What we’re in right now, the hole we’ve spent 18 months crawling out of, is far from “best conditions.”

Even so, there are times when raises are appropriate. After all, the cost of living in the D.C. area must be astronomical. But at least have a vote about it. Let those who spend our hard-earned tax dollars make their case for a pay bump.

The notion of taking an ax to automatic raises is gaining steam. Last year the Senate approved a measure to do just that. Grassley is one of 20 senators to write House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and ask for the House to vote on the measure.

We hope Grassley and Loebsack keep up the pressure.

Eliminating the automatic raise and taking pay cuts would send a signal that lawmakers respect the struggles of those who are fighting their way through this recession.