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With members of Congress receiving a \$4,700 pay raise while the nation's economy deteriorates, a bipartisan group of 29 lawmakers is looking to the freshman class of the 111th Congress to help halt the next automatic increase in salary.

"Beyond this incoming freshman class, you have the freshmen from last year, so you have two freshman classes of members who were elected under this environment where the public is tired of seeing excesses, especially in tough economic times," said Seth Scott, spokesman for Rep. Harry Mitchell (D-Ariz.). "People are angered by excesses, whether on Wall Street [or] in Washington. And I think the two freshman classes, both in 2007 and 2009, recognize that."

The second-term Mitchell plans to put forward a bill on Tuesday that would deny lawmakers the next automatic pay increase they're set to receive in 2010. This year's automatic raise amounts to a total of \$2.5 million. It goes into effect this month.

As a freshman last year, Mitchell sponsored a similar bill, which garnered about one-third of its 34 co-sponsors from fellow first-term members, who are often the most vulnerable. Though last year's bill failed to make it out of committee, Mitchell's office is optimistic that with more than 50 new members in the House this year, the bill will gather the necessary support.

"We're going to start with a stronger base," Scott said of the nearly 30 lawmakers already signed on to the bill, six of whom are freshmen.

"I think there's going to be a lot more pressure on Congress as an institution, not only from the inside, from freshman members and now from the sophomore class, but also from constituents and voters who are tired of seeing their taxpayer dollars go to pay raises of members of Congress during a recession."

At 2.8 percent, the automatic raise that lawmakers receive this year is only half as large as the 2009 cost-of-living adjustment provided to Social Security recipients. But even that amount has lawmakers on both sides of the aisle balking at taking a pay raise with the economy in its

current state.

"Turning down our automatic pay increase this year is the least Congress could do to demonstrate fiscal responsibility and solidarity with our constituents in these tough economic times," said Rep. Ron Paul (R-Texas), a co-sponsor of Mitchell's bill who also has sponsored a similar measure of his own. "Much more needs to be done to reduce the size and expense of government, but passing this legislation would be a start."

The bills have received support from prominent watchdog groups that have recently expressed their concern over this year's pay raise, including the Taxpayers for Common Sense. Steve Ellis, that group's vice president, said that the newly Democratic Congress would be foolish not to act to halt its pay increase.

"Granted, they just got reelected, so it's not like they're facing the voters really soon, but the last thing I think the Democrats want with their new Congress and new president is to be dragged down by an albatross of a pay raise," Ellis said.

Lawmakers have floated similar proposals every year dating back to 1995, but usually to no avail. In 2006, after the Republican-led Senate rejected an increase to the minimum wage, Democrats, who had just come to power in the House with a slew of freshmen, vowed to block their own pay raise until the wage increase was passed. The minimum wage was eventually increased and lawmakers received their automatic pay hike.

Ellis said that he expects to see support for the measure come from freshman and senior lawmakers alike and that it holds a good chance of passing by 2010. But the real problem lies with the automatic structure of the raise and the fact that lawmakers don't have to vote to get the increase, said Ellis.

"The bottom line is that if they put a bill on the floor to suspend a pay raise, it would pass," he said. "Everybody knows that the reason why they set up this scheme so they didn't have to vote on it is because they knew that it's politically perilous to vote on a pay raise."

"I think the way Congress should take this is to say, 'We're not going to take a pay raise until we're in a recovery' or 'We're not going to take a pay raise until the unemployment rate is below a certain percentage.' "

Mitchell, like other lawmakers, has donated his pay raise the past two years to a plethora of charities, which this year consists mainly of cash-strapped veterans' organizations.

While respectful of such donations, Ellis said there is another aspect to them.

"It's kind of a win-win-win," he said. "It benefits their pension, because they got the pay raise that builds into it. It benefits their tax status because they're making a charitable contribution, so the lawmaker's getting a tax deduction. And it benefits their public relations, because they're making a \$4,700 contribution to some organization that is most likely in their district and part of their constituency."

Currently, the average lawmaker makes \$169,300 a year, with leadership making slightly more. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) makes \$217,400, while the minority and majority leaders in the House and Senate make \$188,100.