



HOUSE NEARS RELIEF BILL PASSAGE; DEMS MULL WAGE HIKE RESCUE

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Democrats edged a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief package to the brink of House passage late Friday, even as party leaders sought to assure agitated progressives that they'd revive their derailed drive to boost the minimum wage.

A virtual party-line House vote was expected on the sweeping measure, which embodies President Joe Biden's plan to flush cash to individuals, businesses, [states](#) and cities battered by COVID-19. Passage would send the measure to the Senate, where Democrats may try resuscitating their minimum wage push and fights could erupt over state aid and other issues.

Democrats said that the still-faltering economy and the half-million American lives lost demanded quick, decisive action and that GOP lawmakers were out of step with a public that polling shows largely views the bill favorably.

"I am a happy camper tonight," said Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif. "This is what America needs. Republicans, you ought to be a part of this. But if you're not, we're going without you."

Republicans said the bill was too expensive, spent money too slowly to quickly reopen schools, was laden with gifts to Democratic constituencies like labor unions and funneled funds to struggling pension systems and other projects irrelevant to battling the pandemic.

"Before we ask future generations to float us another \$2 trillion to pay off these liberal promises, let's at least have the integrity to admit that this really isn't about COVID," said Rep. Steve Womack, R-Ark.

That divide is making the fight a showdown over which party voters will reward for heaping more federal spending to combat the coronavirus and [revive the economy](#) atop the \$4 trillion approved last year.

The battle is also emerging as an early test of Biden's ability to hold together his party's fragile congressional majorities — just 10 votes in the House and an evenly divided 50-50 Senate.

At the same time, Democrats were trying to figure out how to respond to their jarring setback Thursday in the Senate.

That chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough, said Senate rules require that a federal minimum wage increase would have to be dropped from the COVID-19 bill, leaving the proposal on life support. The measure would gradually lift that minimum to \$15 hourly by 2025, doubling the current \$7.25 floor in effect since 2009.

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Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, D-N.Y., another high-profile progressive, also said Senate rules must be changed, telling reporters that when Democrats meet with their constituents, "We can't tell them that this didn't get done because of an unelected parliamentarian."

Traditionalist senators of both parties — including Biden, who served as a senator for 36 years — have opposed eliminating filibusters because they protect parties' interests when they are in the Senate minority. Biden said weeks ago that he didn't expect the minimum wage increase to survive the Senate's rules.

The House COVID-19 bill includes the minimum wage increase, so the real battle over its fate will occur when the Senate debates its version over the next two weeks.

The overall relief bill would provide \$1,400 payments to individuals, extend emergency unemployment benefits through August and increase tax credits for children and federal subsidies for health insurance.

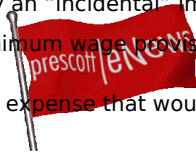
It also provides billions for schools and colleges, state and local governments, COVID-19 vaccines and testing, renters, food producers and struggling industries like airlines, restaurants, bars and concert venues.

Democrats are pushing the relief measure through Congress under special rules that will let them avoid a Senate GOP filibuster, meaning that if they are united they won't need any Republican votes.

It also lets the bill move faster, a top priority for Democrats who want the bill on Biden's desk before the most recent emergency jobless benefits end on March 14.

But those same Senate rules prohibit provisions with only an “incidental” impact on the federal budget because they are chiefly driven by other policy purposes. MacDonough decided that the minimum wage provision failed that test.

Republicans oppose the \$15 minimum wage target as an expense that would hurt businesses and cost jobs.



Associated Press writers Mary Clare Jalonick and Kevin Freking in Washington contributed to this report. AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite.