



Modern Benefits Make This Outdated Congressional Perk Obsolete

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EVAN CANOYER
Associate Policy Analyst

DEMIAN BRADY
Vice President of Research

Key Takeaways

- Congressional “death gratuity” payments are tax-free gifts to heirs of lawmakers who die in office. This tradition, which dates back to at least the 1800s, is merely a tradition and is in no way required by law.
- Since 2000, Congress has approved \$7 million in these payments, and a current appropriations bill includes another \$522,000 for heirs of three recently deceased members.
- Members of Congress receive generous pensions, a basic death benefit, Social Security survivor benefits, and have a much higher median net worth than the median American citizen, making death gratuity an outdated and unnecessary perk.

Introduction

Members of Congress enjoy generous salaries and benefits. Most Americans may be surprised to learn that when a representative or senator passes away in office, taxpayers are on the hook for a tax-free “death gratuity” payment to the lawmaker’s family or heirs equal to a full annual salary. That is worth \$174,000 for rank-and-file members, and more for those in leadership. This perk is not required by law; it’s a longstanding tradition dating back to an era before congressional pensions and federal survivor benefits.

Since 2000, 43 representatives and senators have passed away in office, triggering \$7.5 million in death gratuity payments. These payments are granted on top of other survivor benefits such as a FERS pension along with a basic death benefit and Social Security. In several cases, these benefits went to families of lawmakers with net worths in the millions, which raises the question of the necessity of this practice. With a record-level national debt, and an estimated additional [\\$1.9 trillion](#) deficit in FY2025, Congress should end this outdated perk.

A Longstanding Tradition

In 1946, Congress first passed a law that provided retirement benefits for representatives and senators. For several decades before, Congress had a tradition of providing a death gratuity payment to the heirs of members of Congress who died while serving in office. This perk dates back to an era where many widows of members had limited sources of income, so the payment served as a form of life insurance.

NTUF identified payments as far back as [1880](#), when the Clerk of the House was authorized to pay \$6,000 to the widow of the late Representative Alfred Lay. More extensive research may uncover payments made even earlier than 1880.

Today, the amount paid is equal to a year’s salary for the member. In 2025, rank-and-file members are paid \$174,000; the majority leaders, minority leaders, and the Senate President Pro Tempore get \$193,400; and the Speaker of the House receives [\\$223,500](#). The gratuity payments are usually included within regular or supplemental appropriations bills and are provided as a gift to the recipient so that it is not considered taxable income.

Upcoming Payouts

The proposed [Legislative Branch Appropriations Act of 2026](#) once again includes taxpayer-funded death gratuities for members who passed away while in office. This bill primarily provides annual funding for salaries and operations across the legislative branch, including the Government Accountability Office (GAO), Congressional Budget Office (CBO), and other branch agencies. Alongside these annual appropriations, this bill directs a total of \$522,000 to the heirs of three recently deceased representatives:

- “For the payment to Ashley Paige Turner, heir of Sylvester Turner, late a Representative from the State of Texas, \$174,000.”
- “For payment to Ramona Grijalva, widow of Raul M. Grijalva, late a Representative from the State of Arizona, \$174,000.”
- “For the payment to Catherine M. Smith, widow of Gerald E. Connolly, late a Representative from the Commonwealth of Virginia, \$174,000.”

Former Rep. Turner was reported to have a net worth around [\\$3 million](#), Rep. Connolly had an estimated net worth of over [\\$2.5 million](#), and Rep. Grijalva’s net worth was estimated at [\\$235,010](#).

Payouts Since 2000

Looking at the Congressional Record, NTUF identified payments made to the heirs of each of the members of Congress who passed away while in office since 2000. This list builds on a previous NTUF [analysis](#) from 2021. None of the members who have passed away since 2021 were in leadership positions at the time of their passing, and thus all were paid a death gratuity payment of \$174,000. Although Senator Dianne Feinstein previously served as President Pro Tempore, she decided not to serve the role in the 118th Congress. As a result, her heirs received a death gratuity payment equal to the rank-and-file annual salary.

Gratuity Payments to Heirs of Deceased Members of Congress Since 2000

Members of Congress	Payment Amount	Members of Congress	Payment Amount
Paul Coverdell	\$141,300	Frank Lautenberg	\$174,000
Herbert H. Bateman	\$141,300	Bill Young	\$174,000
Bruce Vento	\$141,300	Alan Nunnelee	\$174,000
Julian C. Dixon	\$141,300	Mark Takai	\$174,000
Norman Sisisky	\$145,100	Louise Slaughter	\$174,000
Joe Moakley	\$145,100	John McCain	\$174,000
Floyd Spence	\$145,100	Walter B. Jones Jr.	\$174,000
Patsy Mink	\$150,000	Elijah Cummings	\$174,000
Paul Wellstone	\$150,000	John Lewis	\$174,000
Bob Matsui	\$162,100	Ron Wright	\$174,000
Charlie Norwood	\$165,200	Alcee Hastings	\$174,000
Juanita Millender-McDonald	\$165,200	Jim Hagedorn	\$174,000
Craig L. Thomas	\$165,200	Don Young	\$174,000
Paul Gillmor	\$165,200	Jackie Walorski	\$174,000
Jo Ann Davis	\$165,200	Donald McEachin	\$174,000
Julia Carson	\$165,200	Dianne Feinstein	\$174,000
Tom Lantos	\$169,300	Donald Payne Jr.	\$174,000
Stephanie Tubbs Jones	\$169,300	Sheila Jackson Lee	\$174,000
Ted Kennedy	\$174,000	Bill Pascrell	\$174,000
John Murtha	\$174,000	Sylvester Turner*	\$174,000
Robert Byrd	\$193,400	Raul Grijalva*	\$174,000
Donald M. Payne	\$174,000	Gerry Connolly*	\$174,000
Daniel Inouye	\$193,400		
Total		\$7,529,200	
Note: * Signifies a payment is still pending and is expected to be included in a forthcoming appropriations package.			

NATIONAL TAXPAYERS UNION FOUNDATION

Since 2000, Congress has approved more than \$7.5 million in taxpayer-funded death gratuities. These payments are made regardless of the financial status of the families of the late members. Several payments were made to families of representatives or senators with net worths estimated in the millions, including:

- Senator Ted Kennedy (net worth from [\\$45 million to \\$150 million](#));
- Senator Dianne Feinstein ([\\$87.9 million](#));
- Senator Frank Lautenberg ([\\$56.8 million](#));
- Senator John McCain ([\\$16 million](#)); and
- Representative Tom Lantos ([\\$6.5 million](#)).

Given the most recent [financial disclosure data](#), the median net worth of the members of the 116th Congress was just over \$1 million. While this has likely grown in recent years, even the 116th Congress was over 12.5 times wealthier than the [median household income](#) in the U.S. in 2023.

The last death gratuity payments came alongside the [Continuing Appropriations and Extensions Act, 2025](#), which included payments to the heirs of Representatives Sheila Jackson Lee, William Pascrell, Jr., and Donald M. Payne, Jr., totaling \$522,000 in additional expenditures. One member, Representative Pascrell, had an estimated net worth of over [\\$5 million](#).

Additional Survivor Benefits

Death gratuity payments are one of many perks on top of other survivor benefits, including survivor annuities, basic federal employee death benefits, and Social Security (members of Congress [began to pay into Social Security in 1983](#)).

Basic Federal Employee Death Benefit

Under the Federal Employees Retirement System (FERS), the surviving spouse is eligible for a basic one-time employee death benefit: 50% of the member's annual salary, plus a lump sum of \$42,607.52 (increased from \$34,991 as of December 2024). This occurs once following a member's passing.

Survivor Annuity

In addition to the one-time payment, [survivors](#) are entitled to a monthly annuity [worth up to 50%](#) of an annuity computed as if the employee had retired on the date of death. Members' annual pensions are calculated based on years of service: they accrue benefits at a rate of 1.7% of their salary for each of the first 20 years, and 1.0% for each year thereafter. Lawmakers need at least five years of service or federal employment to be eligible for a pension annuity.

For example, Rep. Grijalva served in Congress from 2003 until his passing in 2025, giving him over 22 years of federal legislative service. Based solely on his time in Congress, assuming he was fully enrolled in FERS, he would be eligible for an annual congressional pension starting at \$63,005 as a rank-and-file member. A full survivor annuity would leave his spouse eligible for 50% of his pension annually.

Social Security

There are also additional benefits through Social Security, which members of Congress began paying into in 1983, as part of a government-wide pension overhaul. This provides a lump sum

payment of \$255 to a surviving spouse and a monthly [Social Security Survivor Benefit](#). This is calculated based on a percentage of the deceased member's Social Security benefit and varies depending on the surviving spouse's age and eligibility.

Legislative Efforts to End Death Gratuity

Former Representative Bill Posey (R-FL) introduced [H.R. 412](#) in 2021, a bill to eliminate congressional death gratuity payments. The legislation would not have impacted other federal survivor benefits but would have ended the one-time, taxpayer-funded gifts to lawmakers' heirs. Posey had introduced similar versions in multiple sessions of Congress.

In a [statement](#), Posey argued that “members should purchase their own life insurance,” noting that the payments are “difficult to justify, particularly when every other American purchases their own.” The bill never advanced beyond committee, and no similar legislation has been introduced since his retirement in April 2024.

Conclusion

While the death gratuity may have once served an important purpose for spouses and family members, its continued use today alongside federal pensions and survivor benefits is outdated and hard to justify. Since 2020, the U.S. national debt has grown over [\\$4 trillion](#). Ending this taxpayer-funded perk may seem small, but it would be a step in the right direction. Congress should demonstrate fiscal responsibility and end this tradition once and for all.



*2025 National Taxpayers Union Foundation
122 C Street NW, Suite 700,
Washington, DC 20001
ntuf@ntu.org*