There is no end to political gimmicks involving Congressional pay. Usually they consist of empty symbolic moves to cancel the annual cost-of-living increase. This year, two are in play — and each has some merit.

One is an amendment to the Senate lobbying reform bill, adopted by voice vote, that would deny any pay bump to Members who cast votes against them. (The House version of the bill does not include this language, so it would have to be approved in a House-Senate conference.)

As we’ve said repeatedly over the years, Members of Congress earn their pay, considering that theirs is a full-time job and that most could be making a lot more than $165,200 in the private sector. We regularly oppose efforts to forgo COLAs, such as the one that passed the Senate last October by vote of 92-6. The House did not go along, so the 1.9 percent raise went through, raising Member pay by $3,100.

One of the 92, Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.), is chief sponsor of the recent lobbying amendment, which, had it been in effect last year, would have required him to forfeit his pay increase. Inhofe normally supports COLAs on the grounds that without them, only Kennedys and Rockefellers, as he puts it, could serve in Congress. But he went along with the herd last year on grounds that, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and considering the recovery’s enormous costs, Members should forgo their own pay increases.

Admirable sentiments, yet last year’s move was exactly the kind of meaningless move that gives Congress a bad name with the public. It would have saved taxpayers all of $2 million when the cost of Katrina will be in the hundreds of billions and when Congress annually approves pork-barrel outlays and tax subsidies worth billions more. And, when public attention shifted from Katrina, the COLA went through anyway, so in the end, no Member had to give up their loot.

Advocating his amendment earlier this year, Inhofe said, “We have gotten into a culture of hypocrisy regarding Congressional pay increases that has become known as ‘Vote “No” and take the dough.’ For some time we have orchestrated a situation that allows Members to vote against a pay raise yet receive a pay raise. What I propose today is to change the system so that a vote against a pay raise means no pay raise.”

We’ll forgive Inhofe his own piece of hypocrisy last year, in as much as his policy is to give his COLA to charity. More to the point, his amendment would make voting against COLAs a consequential act, not just a pose. Passing this measure would provide a meaningful check on Members’ desire to have their cake and eat it too.
The other proposal is the announcement by Rep. Mark Green (R-Wis.) that he will voluntarily give back his pay for days he misses House votes because he is campaigning for governor.

Green’s gimmick is clearly designed to win him favor with Wisconsin voters, and carried to its logical conclusion, making this policy mandatory would be an accounting nightmare. But as a voluntary act, Green’s idea has merit and should be given serious thought by his colleagues.

If nothing else, it serves as a reminder that any Member who believes that he is not earning his Congressional pay is free to give it back to the Treasury.