

Controversial vote splits Md. lawmakers

By John Fritze, The Baltimore Sun

WASHINGTON —

The House of Representatives approved a bipartisan deal to raise the nation's debt ceiling Monday in a vote that splintered the Democratic and Republican members of Maryland's congressional delegation and pushed the months-long battle toward a climax in the Senate on Tuesday.

In an indication of how deeply the proposal challenged the traditional political landscape, several Baltimore-area Democrats who tend to vote similarly wound up on opposite sides of the roll call. Maryland's two House Republicans, Reps. Andy Harris and Roscoe G. Bartlett, also split their votes.

After weeks of high-stakes negotiations at the White House and on Capitol Hill, leaders of both political parties claimed victory with the last-minute compromise, which would cut federal spending by at least \$2.1 trillion over the next decade and allow the government to continue to borrow money through the end of next year. But few rank-and-file House members of either party were celebrating.

"This is a terrible precedent for how you go about raising the debt ceiling," said Rep. John Sarbanes, a Baltimore County lawmaker who was one of three Maryland Democrats to oppose the measure. "We've set the precedent of having the raising of the debt ceiling hijacked every time it comes along."

In addition to Sarbanes and Harris, Democratic Reps. Elijah E. Cummings and Donna F. Edwards opposed the bill.

The proposal, crafted by President Barack Obama and Republican Senate leaders over the weekend, would initially slash about \$900 billion in spending over 10 years and would create a bipartisan panel of lawmakers to seek out additional cuts by December.

If that panel fails to reach a deal, the bill calls for automatic, across-the-board cuts of \$1.2 trillion — including to defense spending and Medicare.

The House voted 269-161 to pass the legislation Monday, sending it to the Senate for a down-to-the-wire vote on Tuesday.

Sen. Benjamin L. Cardin said before the House vote that he was undecided on the legislation. He said he was investigating details of the cuts that would be triggered if the bipartisan committee deadlocked or Congress failed to approve its recommendations.

"There's a lot of interesting parts of it," the Maryland Democrat said. "So I continue to read and continue to ask questions."

Much of the concern from Maryland officials appeared to center on the automatic cuts triggered by congressional inaction, which would likely have a disproportionate effect on the state. Maryland is home to more than 286,800 federal workers and local companies were responsible for about \$60 billion in federal contracts in 2010. Many of the automatic cuts envisioned by the bill could fall to defense contractors.

"Now there are two ways to kill this fragile jobs economy," Gov. Martin O'Malley said. "One is to needlessly drive our country into default, and hopefully we've avoided that. But the other way to kill our jobs recovery is to drive our country into massive public-sector cuts that will result in unemployment that will undermine everything we're trying to do with regard to private sector jobs."

Rep. C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger argued that the compromise legislation was the best option available to avoid letting the government run out of money on Tuesday and defaulting on its financial obligations.

The Baltimore County Democrat noted that many of the cuts would not take place right away and that the bill provided protections for Social Security and Medicare enrollees.

"Nothing is perfect, but politics is about consensus, and consensus is about making sacrifices for the good of our nation," Ruppersberger said. "If we had defaulted, all Americans would have been harmed."

After voicing concern over earlier efforts to raise the debt ceiling, Bartlett backed the deal. The Western Maryland Republican has consistently opposed raising the debt ceiling during his 20 years on Capitol Hill, though he supported two conservative proposals to raise the limit in recent weeks that had no chance of passing in the Senate.

As late as an hour before the vote Monday evening, Bartlett said he remained undecided. He called the cuts "trifling, but at least it's symbolic" and said, "We've never before had a chance to say, 'Gee, let's cut spending'" in a bill that raised the debt ceiling.

Bartlett said he was mostly concerned that the initial cuts would take place over the next decade instead of right away.

"That'll never balance your budget at home," he said, "and it's not going to balance your budget here, either."

But in justifying his vote, Bartlett said it was the best of several bad options.

Harris, meanwhile, was one of the first conservatives in Congress to tie his support for raising the debt ceiling to a proposed constitutional amendment that would require Washington to balance the federal budget.

Harris, who voted against the bill, said he was concerned "the linkage to the balanced budget amendment isn't strong enough."

The most recent version only requires a vote on the amendment.

"There's not enough reason for someone to vote for" it, he said.

Congress has raised the debt ceiling 10 times in the past decade, but a new crop of conservative Republicans who helped their party win control of the House in last year's midterm election vowed to use the issue this year to force spending cuts.

Democrats, including Obama, sought to couple those cuts with new revenues from ending tax loopholes, but GOP lawmakers rejected the idea.

Cummings said the lack of any new revenue was a top concern for him, and the reason he voted against the bill.

"First we were talking about making sure the rich paid more taxes, then we were talking about loopholes — off the table," Cummings said. adding that constituents writing his office opposed the measure roughly nine-to-one.

"Now, we've got some language that talks about you might bring it up ... but I see no incentive for them to do it. And that concerns me greatly."