

Congress's \$2 Billion Typo

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Editorial

Parliamentary finagling and arm-twisting abounded earlier this month when the House gave final passage - by two votes - to a \$39 billion package of controversial spending cuts. President Bush quickly signed it into law. Whoops, as they say in the sausage-making business: because of a clerk's mistake, the House bill was not precisely the same as the one that was passed on a similarly narrow vote in the Senate.

Good thing we're a nation of laws, and the two houses are required to approve identical measures for the president's signature. Well, yes, concede the Republican leaders of Congress, but let's not get caught up making a big deal of a minor technicality.

The error won't go away. The Senate voted for a 13-month subsidy for Medicare patients' equipment, while the House voted for 39 months' worth. The final bill sent from the House to the president's desk mysteriously had the Senate's 13-month limit, despite the House's more generous provision. A Senate clerk made the original error, creating a \$2 billion difference between the two bills.

A routine vote could fix things. But as Republican leaders ready the stage for another wad of tax cuts for the upper brackets, the last thing they want is to open a fresh debate on the budget measure's harsh cutbacks on programs for the poor and the middle class. And House Democrats are not in an election-year mood to white-out the typo without a debate.

What to do? Well, one taxpayer is already suing to undo this precedent for further Congressional sloppiness. But we're a nation of politics as well as laws. This fall, voters will have a chance to take a second look at the indefensible cutback bill, even if Congress's leaders are afraid to.