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Coloradans in Congress drift apart on today's balanced-budget amendment vote

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WASHINGTON — As the House casts a significant vote today on a balanced-budget amendment, the differences between what Colorado Republicans and Democrats want are growing more stark by the hour.

Some Democrats, including Reps. Ed Perlmutter and Jared Polis, say the notion of a balanced-budget amendment is OK as long as Social Security and infrastructure projects are protected. In other words, the government can deficit spend only to pay for those things.

"I don't think you should start attacking things that never played a role in what caused the debt to begin with," said Perlmutter, who said he is leaning toward "no" on the vote today. "It didn't come from early-childhood education; it didn't come from Social Security."

The Republicans started out in an opposite position, and most, including Reps.

Mike Coffman and Doug Lamborn, would like spending caps every year, regardless of where revenues come in.

What they will vote on today is what Coffman, chairman of the Balanced Budget Amendment caucus, calls a compromise.

The proposal on the table would require the federal government to balance its budget every year, without spending caps. If revenues come in higher, for example, the government could spend more. It would make exceptions in times of war or if Congress voted with a supermajority to spend beyond what it had.

"At the end of the day, it's this or nothing," said Coffman, who has spent day and night this week trying to get House members, including Democrats, to vote yes. "If we're just out to make a political statement . . . then we can go home and just issue some great press releases. I think this is the most responsible course of action to take."

For this to ever come to fruition, the Senate would have to pass a version, also with a

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two-thirds majority. And then it would have to be ratified by 38 states.

The president has come out against this version of the balanced-budget amendment, but because it would be a constitutional change, the president does not have to sign it.

A similar version failed by one vote in 1995, with a lot of Democratic support.

But Democrats are less likely to come along now because the stakes are higher.

The deficit is larger — in the 1990s, there were surpluses — and it would take more sacrifice on entitlement programs and domestic spending to spend only what the government takes in.

"If every family in America had to balance its budget and then junior wanted to go to college and the family said, 'Sorry, we can't do that, we have to have a balanced budget' — that makes no sense," said Heather Boushey, a senior economist at the left-leaning Center for American Progress. "Why would you want to constrain yourself that way?"

From a different political perspective, Tad DeHaven agrees, though not about constraint.

DeHaven, a budget analyst for the Cato Institute, called the balanced-budget amendment a political platitude for Republicans who are too scared to talk about what they would actually cut in federal spending.

The federal government's revenues are projected to be about \$2.6 trillion in 2012, with about \$3.6 trillion in projected expenditures.

"To all those balanced-budget amendment folks out there who don't want tax increases, what would you cut?" DeHaven said. "There's not a heck of a lot of people who are being specific."

Lamborn, who made a speech on the floor Thursday urging colleagues to pass a balanced-budget amendment, is in this pickle because he doesn't want any more cuts to defense spending.

He welcomes a constitutional change, though, and said, "If we cut everything equally, defense shouldn't be cut. . . . Defense has taken a disproportionate share of cuts."

Sen. Mark Udall has been a leading Democrat on the other side of the Capitol in finding common ground on a balanced-budget amendment.

Though Udall is still a co-sponsor of a

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version similar to what the House will vote on today, he has recently moved farther to the left and is pushing for a version that protects Social Security.

"When I'm in Colorado, business owners tell me that they don't have faith in Congress to work together and tackle its overwhelming debt," Udall said in a statement. "A large part of building confidence and helping businesses grow is to show that the government can balance their budget just like Americans have to in their own lives."

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