

Real World Graduation: Question 72: Congressional Salaries

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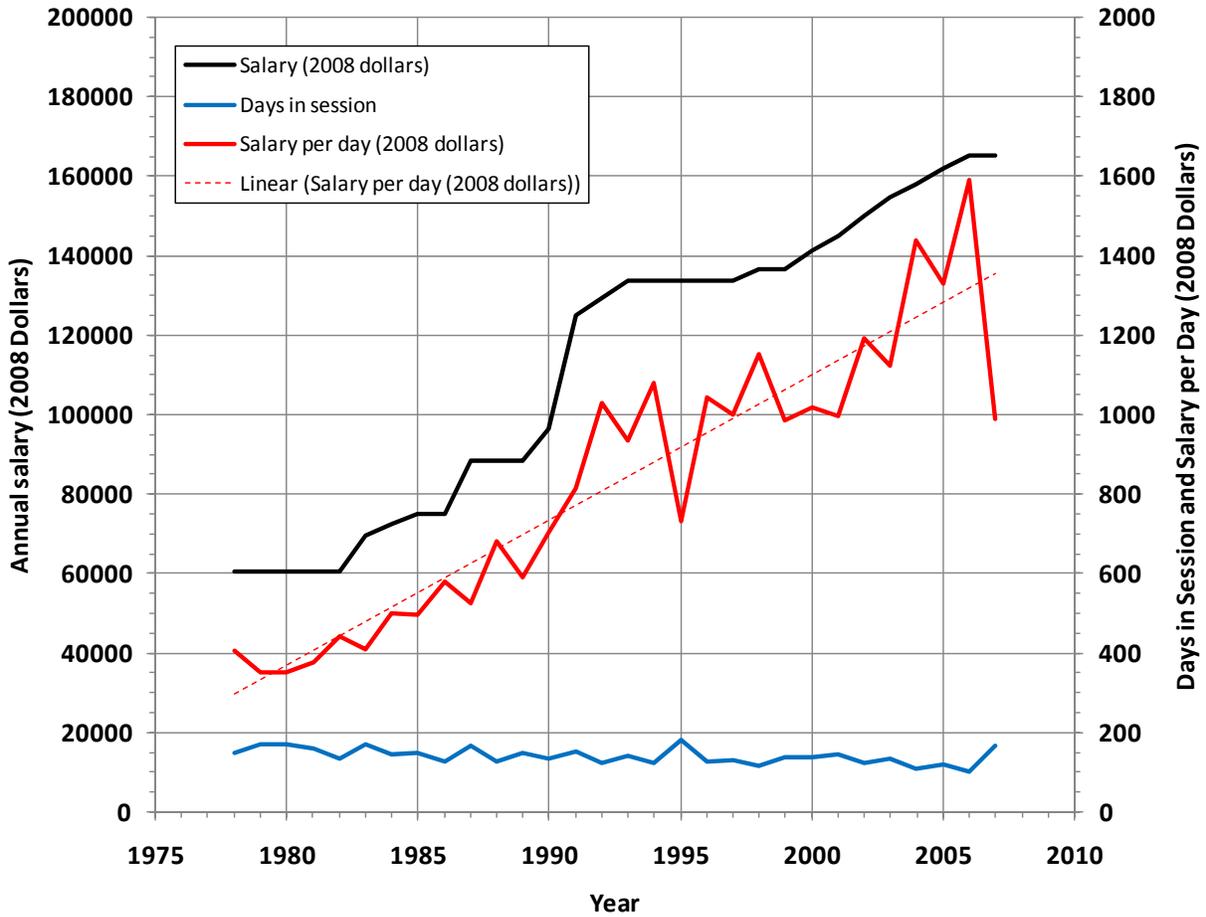
Question 72

Consider the following chart, which contains data on the salaries of members of Congress [1] and the number of days Congress (House) was in session [2]. The black line shows the annual salary of House members for each year, normalized to 2008 dollars (the salary value is read from the vertical axis at left). The solid blue line shows the number of calendar days the House was in session for each year; the value is read on the vertical axis at right. The solid red line shows the salary per working day (annual salary divided by the number of days in session); the value is read on the vertical axis at right. Finally, the dashed red line shows a linear fit to the salary per day (value read at right); it indicates the general trend. What conclusions can be drawn from this data?

- a) The annual salary has leveled off in the past two years, and the number of days worked has increased, driving the salary per day down. This trend will continue.
- b) The salary per day is becoming too large compared to what ordinary people make. Eventually, Congress will either reduce the Congressional salary or work more days in order to bring their compensation more in line with ordinary people.
- c) The salary per day is increasing only because the number of days worked is steadily decreasing. This shows that Congress is becoming more efficient. Therefore, the salary per day will increase, but that is a positive trend because it reflects increased Congressional productivity.
- d) The salary per day line shows that Congress took pay cuts in 1979, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1993, 1995, 1997, 1999, 2001, 2003, 2005, and 2007. Therefore, it is only fair that the long-term trend of salary per day be upward to compensate for those cuts.
- e) Either b) or c).

[1] Ida A. Brudnik, "Salaries of Members of Congress: A List of Payable rates and Effective Dates, 1789-2008"; Congressional Research Service, The Library of Congress, 21 Feb 2008

[2] The Library of Congress, "THOMAS", see <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/ds>.



Answer to Question 72

This is a trick question. All of the answers are false, but are the type of claims you might hear from members of Congress as they attempt to justify the low number of workdays.

Answer a) is wrong because it is contrary to the thirty-year trend shown in the chart; there is no evidence to believe that salaries will level out.

Answer b) is wrong because the data shows that Congress has never taken a salary cut, and the number of days worked continues to decline, although ordinary people have to work more days (or hours) over time to maintain the same standard of living. It is reasonable to conclude that the members of Congress do not believe their compensation should be related in any way to the compensation of ordinary people. Answer c) is wrong because the quality of work done by Congress continues to worsen every year; if anything, useful productivity is going down.

Answer d) is wrong because the salary per day is the wrong metric to use in evaluating whether or not they took a pay cut. The black line shows that Congress has never taken a pay cut.

Given the poor quality of Congressional work (they weaken the nation every time they take a vote); we would be better off if they were paid multi-million dollar salaries plus allowed them to keep all the campaign donations for personal use, so long as they were allowed to work only three weeks per year.