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Reform? Republicans Reconsider

BYLINE: By RYAN LIZZA; Ryan Lizza covers the White House for The New Republic.

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ONE of the first things Republicans did in 1995 after they took control of the House was to adopt tighter ethics rules for House members, in response to what they saw as decades of Democratic arrogance and abuse.

On Tuesday, after the new House was sworn in, the Republicans passed their first piece of business for the 108th Congress: House rules that overturned some of their old reforms. Critics quickly focused on the easing of restrictions on lobbyist-paid meals that are sent to Capitol Hill and on the loosening of limits on House member trips paid for by charities. But there were other long-sought changes, harder to understand and ridicule, which provide Republicans help in the tough budget negotiations ahead.

Critics were up in arms about the new pizza rule, so called because lobbyists can now deliver food and beverages, up to \$50 per person, to members of Congress and their staffs.

"What we are talking about is Chinese food," said Jo Powers, the spokeswoman for David Dreier, the Republican representative from California who leads the rules committee. "It's not like steaks are being delivered."

Another change allows charities to pick up the tab for travel and lodging for members to attend their events. Critics say this harks back to the days when House members cavorted with special interests on free trips to golf resorts. But, Ms. Powers said, "sometimes a member will be a big draw for charity." "If it will help the charity double their take, it's worth bringing them down," she added.

Democrats, who were on the losing side of a party-line vote on the new package, cried hypocrisy. "Republicans were the ones agitating for these strict gift rules," Martin Frost, the top Democrat on the House Rules Committee, said in an interview. "They've now put back the system of abuses they once complained about."

Remember term limits? Republicans gave up on that cause long ago, and now they've also overturned their 1995 rule limiting a member to four terms as Speaker of the House. J. Dennis Hastert will now be able to serve as House speaker for years to come.

Republicans chalk up the changes to experience, not a loss of principle. "It took us time to learn about the process of governing," Mr. Dreier said last week in defending the package.

Two other rule changes stand to help Republicans win any public relations war over the budget. Republicans reinstated the so-called Gephardt rule, named after its author, the

Missouri Democrat who just stepped down as minority leader. The rule, adopted when Democrats were in the majority, allows the House to evade an unpleasant task: voting on whether to raise the statutory ceiling on the **national debt**.

Republicans repealed this rule in 2001, when the budget was in surplus, but now they see the wisdom of the provision, which increases the limit on public debt automatically when the House adopts its annual budget resolution.

This means that a separate, potentially embarrassing floor vote to authorize more debt is no longer required at a time when the budget deficit, projected to be about \$150 billion this year, is sure to rise if Congress passes a new round of tax cuts.

Last year, Democrats used a vote on the debt ceiling to dramatize the worsening deficit and attack President Bush's economic policies.

"It was a very difficult, very political vote," Ms. Powers said, adding that under the Gephardt rule, "it's going to be less of a political football."

The biggest rule change, however, is something that Republicans have long wanted, but thought too controversial to adopt when they first took over the House in 1995.

The Ways and Means Committee, where every tax law originates, will now be required to use "dynamic scoring," which estimates the cost of a tax change by predicting its impact on economic growth, rather than just calculating how much revenue would be lost or gained. Currently, Congressional economists use "static scoring," which assumes that a tax cut of, say, \$100 billion will reduce government revenues by the same amount.

For years the supply-side economists have insisted that tax cuts stimulate the economy, producing increased government revenue that partially offsets the original cuts. But to their dismay, their own director of the Congressional Budget Office, Dan L. Crippen, rejected dynamic scoring. His term recently ended, and he was not reappointed. Replacing him is Douglas J. Holtz-Eakin, the top economist at the White House Council of Economic Advisers, who conservatives say is a champion of dynamic scoring. Indeed, the council used dynamic scoring to predict that rather than costing \$359 billion over the next five years, Mr. Bush's tax cut will reduce government revenues by only \$166 billion.

Republicans argue that all the new rules passed this week will modernize the House. In fact, at least in one respect, Republicans are bringing the House into the 21st century. While cell phones and laptops are still banned, a new rule allows members to use their Palm Pilots, pagers and Blackberries on the House floor.

Perhaps they can use them to order a pizza.

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