Pessimism grows on 'fiscal cliff'

Democrats in the House could play bigger role

The Associated Press

As the country lurches toward a "fiscal cliff," lawmakers are increasingly skeptical about a deal, and some predict the best possibility would be a small-scale patch because time is running out before the year-end deadline.

Sen. Joe Lieberman, I-Conn., predicted Sunday, "We're going to spend New Year's Eve here, I believe."

Even those who see the possibility of a deal don't expect a lot.

Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, said on CBS' *Face the Nation* she expects "it is going to be a patch because in four days we can't solve everything."

After the collapse Thursday of House Speaker John Boehner's plan to allow tax rates to rise on million-dollar-plus incomes, Lieberman, appearing on CNN's *State of the Union*, said, "It's the first time that I feel it's more likely we'll go over the cliff than not,"



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President Obama called for a measure that would extend tax cuts.



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE, AP

John Boehner's plan didn't have the required Republican support.

meaning that higher taxes for most Americans and painful federal agency budget cuts would be in line to go ahead.

One possible solution: Lawmakers might be able to pass a compromise quickly if Republican leaders let Democrats provide most of the votes.

About 10% of the House's members — staunch anti-tax conservatives — were able to thwart Boehner's bid to pass a narrowly crafted bill that might have strengthened his bargaining hand.

By trying to pass his plan with GOP votes alone, Boehner could afford to lose only two dozen of the 241 House Republicans. He fell short and gave up without seeking a formal vote. The miscalculation left negotiations in disarray as the Dec. 31 deadline nears.

The House's 192 Democrats essentially sat on the sidelines, bit players in last week's House drama.

House speakers traditionally advance major legislation only if most of their party's members support it. It's called the "majority of the majority" rule. Past speakers, including Democrat Nancy Pelosi and Republican Dennis Hastert, have ignored the rule at times.

Some Democrats are calling on Boehner to do the same.

Many House Democrats would probably join a sufficient number of Republicans — though not necessarily a majority — to pass a compromise along the lines that Boehner and President Obama seemed to be nearing last week before Boehner struck out on his own.

Such a compromise plan might preserve Bush-era tax cuts for all couples making less than $400,000 or so a year. It could include an outline for spending cuts. If every House Democrat supported such a deal, it would need only 25 Republican votes to pass.

"If Speaker Boehner is willing to bring to the floor of the House a bill, and just let this House work its will, Democrats and Republicans voting as their conscience determines, then I believe we can get something done," Rep. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., told Bloomberg TV.