19 OCTOBER 2023 / SPEAKERLESS

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]  
[BILLBOARD]

*<CLIP> CLERK TALLYING SPEAKER VOTES “Hoyer.” “Jeffries.” “Jeffries.” “Hoyle of Oregon.” “Hakeem Jeffries.” “Jeffries.” “Hudson.” “Jordan.”*

SCORING IN –

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Hakeem Jeffries is not trying to be Speaker of the House. Not right now at least.   
  
But Hakeem Jeffries keeps getting the most votes to be Speaker.   
  
It happened on Tuesday:

*<CLIP> SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE PATRICK MCHENRY: The Honorable Jim Jordan of the State of Ohio has received 200 votes. The honorable Hakeem Jeffries of the State of New York has received 212 votes.*

SEAN: It happened again on Wednesday:

*<CLIP> SPEAKER PRO TEMPORE PATRICK MCHENRY: The Honorable Jim Jordan of the State of Ohio has received 199. The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries of the State of New York has received 212.*

SEAN: The only problem with Hakeem Jeffries getting the most votes is that he’s a Democrat. And *Republicans* actually control the United States House of Representatives.   
  
The Democrats are united. The Republicans have never looked more fractured.   
  
What to do about an even more broke than usual Congress, coming up on *Today, Explained*.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> [gavel hitting] “The House will be in order. The clerk may call the roll.” “Today.” “Yay.” “Explained.” Yay.”*

SEAN: When we last covered Congress, it was to tell you about the fall of Speaker Kevin McCarthy. We mentioned Steve Scalise, his number two, was the likely candidate for the job. That didn’t go well. Which brings us to an UNLIKELY candidate for the job, Jim Jordan.  
  
We got Andrew Prokop, senior politics correspondent at Vox, to explain.

ANDREW: Jim Jordan has long been, kind of the leader of the far right extremist faction of the Republicans in the House of Representatives. He's been in the House since 2006. And as soon as Republicans won a majority in the 2010 midterms, that was the big Tea Party wave, he went about kind of trying to transform that Tea Party energy into a strategy to disrupt the ordinary functioning of American government in an effort to push policy to the right.

*<CLIP> REPRESENTATIVE JIM JORDAN: We’re not gonna support borrowing more money. We’re not gonna support raising the debt ceiling. This is out of control.*

ANDREW: In the Obama administration, these battles were mainly about spending.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA: Republican House members have essentially said that the only way they’ll vote to prevent America’s first-ever default is if the rest of us agree to their deep spending-cuts-only approach.*

ANDREW: They spurred a debt ceiling crisis in 2011 and the government shutdown in 2013. All this time, he was a constant thorn in the side of Speaker John Boehner, who would later, after Boehner himself resigned, compared Jordan to a legislative terrorist.

*<CLIP> FORMER SPEAKER JOHN BOEHNER: I just never saw a guy who spent more time tearing things apart and never building anything. Never put anything together.*

ANDREW: He didn't have a lot of love from the party establishment, to put it mildly. But he also was building another power base for himself on investigations in the House.

<SCORING IN> Do your job do some research

*<CLIP> REPRESENTATIVE JIM JORDAN: State Department experts knew the truth. You know the truth. But that’s not what the American people got.*

ANDREW: So he quickly distinguished himself on the House Oversight Committee and the House Judiciary Committee as one of the fiercest, toughest questioners.

*<CLIP> REPRESENTATIVE JIM JORDAN: Why didn’t you tell the American people exactly what you told the Egyptian prime minister?*

ANDREW: Always like snarling with condescension about any Obama administration officials coming before him; investigating things like the attacks on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi.

*<CLIP> FORMER SECRETARY OF STATE HILARY CLINTON: Well I think if you look at the statement that I made, I clearly said it was an attack. And I also said that there were some who tried to justify...  
REPRESENTATIVE JIM JORDAN: Secretary Clinton —  
CLINTON: … on the basis, on the basis of the video, Congressman. And I think it’s  
JORDAN: But but but, calling it “an attack” is like saying the sky’s blue. Of course it was an attack!*

ANDREW: And then continuing forward once Donald Trump became president. He kind of switched to become an all out defender of Trump against any investigations from the U.S. Justice Department.

*<CLIP> REPRESENTATIVE JIM JORDAN: Did the Democrats publish phone records of a member of the press?*

*REPRESENTATIVE DANIEL GOLDMAN: Yes, he was also involved —  
JORDAN: Did the Democrats publish phone records of a member of Congress?  
GOLDMAN: Yes, who was talking to people involved —  
JORDAN: Did the Democrats also happen to be your boss’s political opponent, that those phone records were published…*

ANDREW: He became a big critic of Robert Mueller back before so many Republicans were doing that. And so this kind of helped make him a champion of the right. So he had this kind of two pronged focus. One was screwing up Republican leaders strategy on funding the government and the ordinary business of government spending in an effort to force far more right wing policy that never ended up working. And two, was just being the partisan warrior who was kind of leading the right and their causes when it came to these investigations.   
  
 <SCORING OUT> Do your job do some research

ANDREW: Jordan actually tried to get the top Republican leadership position once before. This was in 2018, and he ran against Kevin McCarthy. He lost in a landslide. And after that, McCarthy told him he had a choice to make. Jordan really wanted to become the top Republican on the House Oversight Committee and then later the House Judiciary Committee giving him even more investigative power. But McCarthy said, if you want that, you need to agree to stop embarrassing leaders, namely me, and be more of a team player and stop screwing up our strategy on these spending fights. And Jordan basically agreed. So if we carry it forward into this year, Jordan didn't make trouble for McCarthy. He was a loyal ally, and McCarthy valued that loyalty. He valued Jordan's loyalty more reportedly than his own number two, Steve Scalise. When Scalise and Jordan were running against each other. McCarthy seemed to prefer Jordan, and he's been notably, publicly more enthusiastic about Jordan's run than Scalise's.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS: RACHEL SCOTT, CONGRESSIONAL CORRESPONDENT: This morning. Whiplash on Capitol Hill. Congressman Steve Scalise dropping out of the race for speaker just one day after being nominated.*

*REP. STEVE SCALISE: Our conference still has to come together and it is not there.*

*RACHEL SCOTT, CONGRESSIONAL CORRESPONDENT: Scalise was scrambling to secure the votes, meeting with Republicans behind closed doors for hours, but in the end, it wasn't enough.*

SEAN: Okay. So Jordan's got at least some of McCarthy's backing. How does that help him when his speakership comes to the House floor this week?

ANDREW: Before going to the floor the Republicans took another internal secret conference vote about how many people would really be against Jim Jordan if he went to the House floor. And at that time, 55 Republicans said they would oppose Jordan, which is like far, far short of the near unanimity he needs within the GOP conference to become speaker. So when he went to the floor for the first time on Tuesday, he ended up with 200 Republican votes, which is, you know, it's not as bad as 55 defections. It turned out to be 20 defections and he could only afford to really have three or four, depending on if everyone showed up voting against him. So it wasn't as bad as it initially seemed, but he still was pretty far short of what he actually needed. And then they took another vote midday Wednesday, and same basic story. He got a little further away. In fact, 22 …  
  
SEAN: Hm!  
  
ANDREW: … Republicans voted against him. A lot of votes for Jordan are being cast through gritted teeth. People don't really like the way he handled his kind of showdown with Scalise. You know, after Scalise had prevailed in the internal conference vote. He asked Jordan for his support. And according to one report of the conversation in Politico, Jordan basically said, ‘You'll have me for one ballot and then you need to withdraw and endorse me.’ And he told Scalise, “America wants me!” before storming out of the room.

SEAN: <laughs> I'm glad these grownups are in charge of our government …

ANDREW: <kinda sorta chortles> So after that, as Jordan has been trying to line up the votes, he's kind of unleashed the right wing base to really go after and pressure the holdouts.

*<CLIP> CARLOS GIMENEZ (R-FL): If that's how, if he becomes speaker, that's the way that he's going to get his policies through. He'll, he will intimidate you or his followers will intimidate you into doing some things you may not want to do. I for one, I'm not going to fall for it. I'm a no.*

ANDREW: They are kind of a mixed group of Republicans. Some of them represent swing districts and they fear politically a Jordan speakership would make them look bad in their districts. Some are members of the powerful House Appropriations Committee, and they don't like Jordan's attempt to basically overhaul government spending policy. They like their control over government spending policy and their ability to direct it. And perhaps they are defense hawks as well. And they don't like Jordan's support of cutting defense spending either. So he has this opposition. He's unleashing the right wing base on them. But that's not a way to win love and loyalty. He's been trying to bully and intimidate his way to 217 votes, the exact amount he needs. But at least in the second ballot, he didn't make any progress. In fact, he got further away.

SEAN: It sounds like America maybe doesn't want him, Andrew.

ANDREW: America, which in the coinage of Trump and his supporters, generally means, you know, the most extreme right wing people in America.

*<CLIP> FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Your favorite president, Donald J. Trump.*

SEAN: What does this mean for our government right now? There's a lot going on in the world. There's a lot going on in the country. Is Jim Jordan gonna call another vote? Is anything getting done?

ANDREW: Nothing is moving through the House of Representatives right now. They've been at a dead halt. They can't pass any bills until they choose a speaker. At least that is the position, currently, of the person who is temporarily in charge right now, Patrick McHenry.

*<CLIP> PATRICK MCHENRY: The chair declares the House in recess, subject to the call of the chair. [gavel bangs]*

<SCORING IN> Question marks

SEAN: This is, uh, our friend with the bowtie.

ANDREW: Yes. Yes. Patrick McHenry of North Carolina, known for always wearing sharp looking bow ties. He's currently filling the speaker role on a temporary basis while the House selects a new speaker. But it's now looking like it might not be so temporary. As of midday Thursday, Jordan himself had reportedly told Republicans in private that he now supported a proposal to give McHenry the powers of the speakership until January 2024. Jordan is not giving up yet. He wants to take another shot at winning the speaker's election, but he doesn't yet have the votes. So he's basically saying let's try it again in January. Jordan would still be waiting in the wings, trying to give it another shot. That's the current plan. Will it actually hold up? Uh, we'll have to find out.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Listener, believe me when I tell you that literally hours after Andrew told us about Jim Jordan’s current plan, it changed. Jim Jordan is now saying he’s gonna call another vote. It’ll be his third. Only thirteen more to go to beat your buddy Kevin’s record, Jimmy. More with Andrew on how we get out of this mess, when we’re back on Today, Explained.

<SCORING OUT> Question marks

[BREAK]  
[BUMPER]

*<CLIP> OUTKAST: Speaker –   
 DAVID HERMAN (Today, Explained DJ): VOX!*

SEAN: *Today, Explained* is back with Andrew Prokop from Vox. Andrew, the last time we talked about this mess in Congress on this show, you know, I asked whether Democrats were partly to blame here for helping create this kerfuffle to begin with, but now it feels like it's on the Republicans to resolve it and they're not having any luck. What does that say about this Republican Party right now?

ANDREW: The Republican Party is deeply divided. There is a kind of extreme hard line faction that is temperamentally unsuited to the realities of governing and having power, but the vast majority of the Republican Party agrees that, you know, the government needs to be funded because it provides important services to the American people, but also because the party will look really bad politically if it shuts down and they get the blame. History has shown that generally Republicans do get blamed when they force government shutdowns with these hard line tactics.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-82srMiS7I)*> ABC NEWS - George Stephanopoulos - news anchor: According to our latest poll 53% of Americans blame President Trump and congressional Republicans. 29% blame Democrats.*

ANDREW: Another issue that's been really splitting the party is Ukraine. And the far right kind of the MAGA right has turned really hard against further military aid to Ukraine and they want to cut them off.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZW4lSPmrCIE)*> FORBES - REP MATT GAETZ - A majority of the majority do not support additional financial assistance to Ukraine.*

ANDREW: But there’s still a sizable mainstream Republican foreign policy faction that says, no, it's important to keep arming Ukraine because thhey are waging a righteous struggle and resistance against Russia, who is one of our rivals.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/19/politics/mike-turner-mike-mccaul-ukraine-military-cnntv/index.html)*> CNN - REP. MICHAEL MCCAUL- (R) Chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee - I would say support is still very strong, and this delegation, this bipartisan, very strong support for Ukraine.*

ANDREW: That's another big issue, splitting the party. Then there are, you know, conservative members in conservative districts who only are ever thinking about threats from the right - primaries they might face from the right - versus swing district members. I believe there are 18 Republicans right now representing districts Joe Biden won in 2020. They need to appeal to a certain amount of voters who voted for Joe Biden or else they're going to lose their seats. So naturally, they are less inclined to support crazy, extreme right wing stuff.

SEAN: If this whole episode in Congress right now is evidence of anything, it's that the far right has sort of discovered its power in the Republican conference. Have the moderates been able to discover anything about themselves in the intervening week?

ANDREW: I think that discovery happened this week. You know, we've seen the far right make it very difficult for McCarthy to be elected speaker. We've seen the far right take him out. Last week, we saw the far right torch Steve Scalise's speakership bid There is much speculation in Washington about, oh, there are all these, whether you call them moderates or mainstream Republicans, swing districts members, people with a variety of concerns about Jordan. But would they really stand up to the right? Would they really stand up to the pressure campaign from conservative media and going into the vote Tuesday, there was a big question – relatively few Republicans had said publicly that they would oppose Jordan on the floor, but then it turned out 20 of them did.

*<CLIP> SCRIPPS - ANCHOR - “Representative Marionette Miller Meeks of Iowa told me that she would only back Jordan on the first ballot, and on the second ballot, she would decline to back him unless he made major changes, instead pushing for a unity candidate with Democrats.*”

ANDREW: So that was perhaps a watershed moment in which there was the moderates kind of sending the message, hey, we can do this, too. We are not just going to fold and let you run the show every time. This is the rest of the Republican Party, or at least enough of them saying, actually, we are not going to stand for this, at least not yet. <laughs>

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/17/politics/house-republicans-speakership-gamble/index.html)*> CNN - ANCHOR - “How does that make you guys look?*

*REP. AUSTIN SCOTT - (R-GA) -”Makes us look like a bunch of idiots.”*

*REP. NICOLE MALLIOTASKIS (R-NY)- “This is petty. This is petty and I'm getting freaking tired of this.”*

*REP. MARK ALFORD (R-TX) - “We're a ship that doesn't have a rudder right now and I'm thoroughly disappointed in the process.”*

*REP. ANDY BARR - (R-KY) - “This is not responsible. We need to elect a speaker.”*

*REP. MARC MOLINARO - (R-NY) -”We've allowed emotion, uh, to get in the way of logic”*

SEAN: Why can't they work together the way the Democrats seem capable of to just get stuff done? Why is it that Democrats can be a bloc even though it's a party that represents a broad political spectrum? But Republicans can't?

ANDREW: Yeah, it's very interesting. There is a broad spectrum of views within the Democratic Party from, you know, the most moderate members to the squad in the House. And yet when push came to shove, when they did have a House majority, the squad was totally willing to support Biden's legislative priorities when their votes actually mattered and when they faced a choice between, you know, pushing policy to the left but not as far left as they want or doing nothing. There is power in this Congress in having a willingness and a tolerance for doing nothing, just letting the debt ceiling be breached. They said, ‘Well, screw this! We, we fundamentally reject the standard assumptions of how Washington governance should work, and we're happy to burn the place down.’

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-82srMiS7I)*> ABC NEWS: GEORGE STEPHANOPOULUS - ANCHOR: the GOP beatring most of the blame right now. But the big question - is it enough to make them change their approach?  
REPORTER: “Yeah, and George and so far this public pressure is not making them blink . . .”*

ANDREW: Because partisanship is so strong, polarization is so strong, there's so little desire to work with Democrats and a lot of fear of the political consequences of working with Democrats that the far right has essentially been able to steer the Republican Party strategy for much of the year, arguably for several years.

SEAN: You know, the far right of the Republican Party, if they're to be believed on their faces, they want some real reform in Congress. They want to dramatically rethink how Congress spends money, what Congress spends money on. They want real change.

*<*[*CLIP*](https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3483993-house-approves-40b-in-aid-for-ukraine-57-republicans-vote-no/)*> REP. SCOTT PERRY (R-PA ): And we’re showing the American people that this process works. We’re not gonna take anymore of Washington being broken. We’re gonna do something for the American people . . .*

SEAN: And it feels like, in this moment, Congress could use real change. I don't know if it should be *that* change, but it seems like there is some dysfunction and paralysis here that needs to be shaken up. Is there any possibility that something gets better as a result of all this dysfunction, or does it only get worse from here?

ANDREW: The problem is that the far right's demands and vision. It's just totally unrealistic, given the current balance of power, they're just, they're never going to get anywhere near anything they want with Democrats in charge of the Senate and the White House. You know, even when Trump was in charge and Republicans controlled the Senate and the House in 2017 and 2018, they didn't get anything near where they wanted. The issue is, will the far right moderate their demands and come closer to reality, or will they be kind of cut loose entirely by the majority of the Republican Party that says, ‘All right, we've we've tried it with these guys. We just can't with them. Like, we have to fund the government. We have to keep things working.And the only way to do that is with Democratic votes. And so we're going to have to work with Democrats and, and, that’s just how it is.’

SEAN: What if the moderate Republicans, of which there are many more than the far right Republicans, got together with the Democrats and just made Hakeem Jeffries the speaker and got a bunch of stuff done?

*<*[*CLIP*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYsZYzmna6o)*> PBS NEWSHOUR - MINORITY HOUSE LEADER HAKEEM JEFFRIES: I know there are traditional Republicans who are good women and men who want to see government function but they are unable to do it within the ranks of their own conferences which dominated by the extremist wing and that is why we continue to extend the hand of bipartisanship to them.*

ANDREW: I would disagree with the premise that there are a lot more moderate Republicans than far right. I mean, if it's purely in relative terms, then that's true. The far right faction is not gigantic. The Republicans are deeply conservative, and, and there has been, polarization is a very real phenomenon. The distance between the furthest left Republican and the furthest right Democrat is still pretty large. All of these Republicans have to win Republican primaries in which only Republicans are voting and they could face a right wing challenger. Everyone's looking over their shoulder because of that. And more than that, there's this whole ecosystem of partisanship, these whole social worlds, fundraising worlds, everything about their career and their, their identity is based on being Republicans and being part of the Republican team. And crossing over to the Democrat team, that's, that's such a betrayal. That's such a big move.

<SCORING IN> Richard Goes Skating

ANDREW: Very few people historically have, have wanted to go that far. and cutting a deal with Jeffries would. Absolutely be viewed as that sort of betrayal. I think the way you get a compromise speaker is probably … I don't know how likely it is, but the path to it would be most Republicans and a relatively small amount of Democrats because no Republican will want to seem like they've sold out to Jeffries. No Republican will want to seem like they're just putting the left in charge. They want a Republican speaker and then maybe a couple dozen Democratic votes to get them over the finish line because the far right is just too recalcitrant. I don't know how you get from where we are now to that outcome, but that's what I could see. I can't really see a dozen Republicans quitting the party, essentially, and, uh, and joining with all Democrats to make Jeffries speaker.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Prokop, Andrew. Vox, dot com.   
  
Our program today was produced by Haleema Shah and Siona Peterous. They had help from Matthew Collette, David Herman, and Tien Nguyen. I’m Sean Rameswaram. It’s *Today, Explained*.