

# [***Hakeem Jeffries isn't speaker yet, but the Democrat may be the most powerful person in Congress***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BXT-MF91-JC5B-G2XD-00000-00&context=1516831)

The Associated Press

May 2, 2024 Thursday 4:06 AM GMT

Copyright 2024 Associated Press All Rights Reserved

**Section:** WASHINGTON DATELINE; POLITICAL NEWS; STATE AND REGIONAL

**Length:** 1128 words

**Byline:** LISA MASCARO, AP Congressional Correspondent

**Dateline:** WASHINGTON

**Body**

WASHINGTON — Without wielding the gavel or holding a formal job laid out in the Constitution, Rep. [*Hakeem Jeffries*](https://apnews.com/article/nancy-pelosi-hakeem-jeffries-congress-government-and-politics-f898cc1a7c59c8f42f669b5f0f167385) might very well be the most powerful person in Congress right now.

The minority leader of the House Democrats, it was Jeffries who provided the votes needed to keep the government running despite [*opposition from House Republicans*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-federal-budget-shutdown-government-d95284dd10deca3d5eb7b1185a770de7) to prevent a federal shutdown.

Jeffries who made sure Democrats delivered the tally to send [*$95 billion foreign aid*](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-aid-israel-tiktok-congress-a8910452e623413bf1da1e491d1d94ba) to Ukraine and other U.S. allies.

And Jeffries who, with the full force of [*House Democratic leadership*](https://apnews.com/article/speaker-mike-johnson-marjorie-taylor-greene-motion-to-vacate-552169f3e831ab8fb3baacfdf76c2d82) behind him, decided this week his party would help Speaker [*Mike Johnson*](https://apnews.com/hub/mike-johnson/) stay on the job rather than be [*ousted by far-right Republicans*](https://apnews.com/article/marjorie-taylor-greene-house-speaker-mike-johnson-28861ef534f9f1ce950a2389af8a4ced) led by Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene.

“How powerful is Jeffries right now?” said Jeffery Jenkins, a public policy professor at the University of Southern California who has written extensively about Congress. “That’s significant power.”

The decision by Jeffries and the House Democratic leadership team to lend their votes to stop Johnson's ouster provides a powerful inflection point in what has been a long political season of [*dysfunction, stalemate and chaos in Congress*](https://apnews.com/article/house-ukraine-aid-speaker-ouster-c525efc953d532242d6d441c55724992).

By declaring enough is enough, that it's time to “turn the page” on the Republican tumult, the Democratic leader is flexing his power in a very public and timely way, an attempt to show lawmakers, and anyone else watching in dismay at the broken Congress, that there can be an alternative approach to governing.

“From the very beginning of this Congress, House Republicans have visited chaos, dysfunction and extremism on the American people,” Jeffries said Wednesday at the Capitol.

Jeffries said that with House Republicans “unwilling or unable" to get "the extreme MAGA Republicans under control, “it’s going to take a bipartisan coalition and partnership to accomplish that objective. We need more common sense in Washington, D.C., and less chaos.”

In the House, the minority leader is often seen as the speaker-in-waiting, the highest-ranking official of the party that's out of power, biding their time in hopes of regaining the majority — and with it, the speaker's gavel — in the next election. Elected by their own party, it's a job without much formal underpinning.

But in Jeffries' case, the minority leader position has come with enormous power, filling the political void left by the actual speaker, Johnson, who commands a fragile, thread-thin Republican majority and is constantly under threat from far-right provocateurs that the GOP speaker cannot fully control.

“He’s operating as a shadow speaker on all the important votes,” said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

While Johnson still marshals the powerful tools of the speaker's office, a job outlined in the Constitution and second in the line of succession to the presidency, the Republican-led House has churned through a tumultuous session of infighting and upheaval that has left their goals and priorities stalled out.

In a fit of displeasure just months into their majority, far-right [*Republicans ousted the previous speaker*](https://apnews.com/article/mccarthy-gaetz-speaker-motion-to-vacate-congress-327e294a39f8de079ef5e4abfb1fa555#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94%20Speaker%20Kevin,its%20Republican%20leadership%20into%20chaos.), the now-retired Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., last fall in a never-before-seen act of party revolt. He declined to specifically ask the Democrats for help.

Johnson faces the same threat of removal, but Jeffries sees in Johnson a more honest broker and potential partner he is willing to at least temporarily prop up — even though Johnson, too, has not overtly asked for any assist from across the aisle. A vote on Greene's motion to vacate the speaker is expected next week.

As Johnson sidles up to Donald Trump, receiving the presumed Republican presidential nominee's [*nod of support*](https://apnews.com/article/trump-speaker-johnson-maralago-congress-c6eaace204882df054795cf70a5fe60a), it is Jeffries who holds what Democratic Rep. Nancy Pelosi, the speaker emerita, has referred to as [*“currency of the realm”*](https://apnews.com/article/328aa2fc6ccd41a3b04e69677b2bbbee) — votes — that are required in the House to get any agenda over the finish line.

Pelosi said in an interview that Jeffries as the minority leader has “always had leverage” because of the slim House majority.

“But it’s a question of him showing that he’s willing to use it,” she said.

Jeffries has been “masterful,” she said, at securing Democratic priorities, notably humanitarian assistance in the foreign aid package that Republicans initially opposed.

But Pelosi disagreed with the idea that Democrats lending support to Johnson at this juncture creates some sort of new coalition era of U.S. ***politics***.

"Our House functions because we’re willing to be bipartisan in making it function,” she said. “He’s not necessarily saving Speaker Johnson — he’s upholding the dignity of the institution."

Jeffries is a quietly confident operator, positioning himself, and his party, as purveyors of democratic norms amid the Republican thunderclap of Trump-era disruption.

The [*first Black American*](https://apnews.com/article/nancy-pelosi-hakeem-jeffries-congress-government-and-politics-f898cc1a7c59c8f42f669b5f0f167385) to lead a political party in Congress, Jeffries is already a historic figure, whose stature will only rise further if he is elected as the first to wield the gavel as House speaker.

Born in Brooklyn, Jeffries, 53, rose steadily through the ranks in New York state ***politics*** and then on the national stage, a charismatic next-generation leader, first elected to Congress in 2012 from the district parts of which were once represented by another historic lawmaker, [*Shirley Chisolm*](https://apimagesblog.com/historical/2022/2/7/shirley-chisholm), the first Black woman elected to Congress.

A former corporate lawyer, Jeffries is also known for his sharp oratory, drawing on his upbringing in the historically Black Cornerstone Baptist Church, a [*spiritual home for many grandchildren and great-grandchildren of enslaved African Americans*](https://apnews.com/article/hakeem-jeffries-religious-faith-politics-mike-johnson-bf64b91ffc34c74a0cd2f7662d1a3e9f) who fled to Brooklyn from the American South. But he also infuses his speeches and remarks with a modern sensibility and cadence, bridging generations.

Last year, when Republicans could not muster the votes on a procedural step for a [*budget and debt deal*](https://apnews.com/article/debt-limit-biden-mccarthy-house-votes-9375cce9b7526b2d0a5728f8d4a18a0a), it was Jeffries who stood intently at his desk in the House chamber, and lifted his voting card to signal to Democrats it was time to step up and deliver.

Repeatedly, Jeffries has ensured the Democratic votes to prevent a federal government shutdown. And last month, when Johnson faced an all-out hard-right Republican revolt over the Ukraine aid, Jeffries again stepped in, assuring Democrats had more votes than Republicans to see it to passage.

Ahead of the November election, the two parties are in a fight for political survival to control the narrowly divided House, and Jeffries would most certainly face his own challenges leading Democrats if they were to gain the majority, splintered over many key issues.

But Jeffries and Johnson have both been in a cross-country sprint, raising money and enthusiasm for their own party candidates ahead of November — the Republican speaker trying to keep his job, the Democratic leader waiting to take it on.

**Load-Date:** May 2, 2024

**End of Document**