

# [***House Republicans are seeking unity at an idyllic West Virginia retreat. Many didn't bother to come***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BJF-S1R1-DYMD-645B-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS, W.Va. — House Republicans huddled in West Virginia on Thursday for a strategy-planning retreat designed to unify the often-fractious conference as they head into the final months before the November election.

One problem: Many didn't bother to show up.

It was the first annual retreat for [*House Speaker Mike Johnson*](https://apnews.com/article/johnson-house-speaker-trump-elected-ed9fd1d574eafb6373e667e110a0f989) since he took the speaker's gavel late last year after [*former Speaker Kevin McCarthy was ousted*](https://apnews.com/article/mccarthy-gaetz-speaker-motion-to-vacate-congress-327e294a39f8de079ef5e4abfb1fa555) from office in a historic move that left Republicans deeply divided and mired in dysfunction.

Johnson does not currently appear at risk of suffering the same fate. But he is trying to figure out how to guide his razor-thin majority through a series of legislative hurdles that divide Republicans, including how to provide military aid for Ukraine, finish government funding and reauthorize a federal surveillance program — all while trying to make a case that voters should reelect a House GOP majority.

Johnson said his message to the Republicans was simple: “We have to stand together, stick together, get the job done, deliver for the American people.”

Democrats have expressed growing confidence they can retake the House in November, but Johnson promised that lawmakers would be in a “better mood next January” if Republicans could sweep the House, Senate and White House.

But many Republican members did not hear that message. A broad swathe of the conference declined the trip to the Allegheny Mountains, where The Greenbrier, a 700-room resort, had been rented out for a few days of team-building exercises.

Several Republicans this week said they excused themselves to spend time with family or attend events in their home districts.

“We spent far too many days in Washington because of the speaker debacle and appropriation negotiation — all important, but I just really need to spend time in the district,” said Rep. Marc Molinaro, a New York Republican.

Others were more blunt. “I just don’t see it as valuable,” said Rep. Eli Crane, an Arizona Republican who frequently defies leadership.

The annual retreat is designed to be a strategy-planning session, but also a chance to build comradery and personal relationships outside the busy halls of the Capitol, said Rep. Lisa McClain, a Michigan Republican who holds a junior position in GOP leadership.

“I think it's really disappointing,” McClain said of the absences. “I know for me I wouldn't miss it. It's fun. It's a good time.”

The turnout underscored how Republicans have been hobbled by conflict since taking the majority last year, though Johnson in a series of news conferences put a positive spin on their time in the majority, casting the House as a bulwark against the agenda of President Joe Biden and Democrats.

“Major conservative wins are not easy to come by, obviously, but we are delivering for the American people nevertheless,” he said.

GOP leaders repeatedly pointed out they are working with a historically thin majority that is only getting smaller. [*Rep. Ken Buck, a Colorado Republican, plans*](https://apnews.com/article/ken-buck-resigns-congress-colorado-ba8123ca43626ee07150a423aa0fcb07) to resign next week, leaving Republicans unable to move bills along party lines if more than two Republicans defect. The GOP majority will be down to 218-213.

The dynamic has forced the speaker to reach across the aisle to pass practically any legislation. The House this week approved 352-65 a bill that would lead to a [*nationwide ban of the popular video app TikTok*](https://apnews.com/article/tiktok-ban-bytedance-bill-divest-5b5a685e8f1e19d22182d62526bf19b8) if its China-based owner doesn’t sell its stake.

Johnson is also in the midst of negotiations on spending bills, including for defense and the Department of Homeland Security, that could settle a government budget debate that has stretched since the fall of last year. Johnson is also mulling how to advance aid for Ukraine through the House.

He is facing heavy political pressure on all sides. [*Democrats have launched*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-aid-israel-taiwan-5cc94d69691ed8f26d6e4ff614cf12fc) an effort to force the aid package to the House floor. Hardline conservatives have vowed to forcefully oppose any aid for Kyiv. And centrist Republicans are becoming restive as they await action.

Bucking Johnson, eight Republicans have already signed onto a [*“discharge petition”*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-aid-israel-taiwan-5cc94d69691ed8f26d6e4ff614cf12fc) — a procedural tool that can circumvent the speaker’s control over which bills come up for a vote. But the effort would need far more support — from at least 218 members — to be successful.

Meanwhile, [*Ukrainian soldiers are suffering*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-resupply-aid-republicans-53db93c5db8ab249503e93b558da5bd8) from shortfalls of ammunition. The [*Pentagon announced*](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-supplemental-war-russia-congress-4aa3731543757156858c2211773a5621) this week it will send about $300 million in weapons to Kyiv after finding some cost savings in its contracts, but the military remains deeply overdrawn and needs at least $10 billion to replenish all the weapons it has pulled from its stocks to the [*desperate fight*](https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-war-avdiivka-2e827b4cae4698b3f6b80a421447fab8) against Russia's invasion.

“It's dire so we need to pass it soon,” said Rep. Michael McCaul, the Republican chair of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

[*McCaul is working*](https://apnews.com/article/congress-ukraine-resupply-aid-republicans-53db93c5db8ab249503e93b558da5bd8) with a group of senior Republicans on potentially adding provisions that would turn funding for Ukraine's government into loans, as well as legislation that would allow the U.S. to tap frozen Russian central bank assets to compensate Ukraine for damages from the invasion. The idea has been circulating for weeks among Ukraine supporters in the House, though there has been little sign of progress.

The speaker expressed support for sending wartime funding to Ukraine but insisted to reporters he would only address it once the House settles government funding — a stance that could delay any action well into April as lawmakers ready to take a two-week break at the end of March.

Many Republicans also want to include border policy with the funding — a demand that ties it to one of the most fraught issues in American ***politics***, and one that has held up the assistance since fall of last year.

“I think we need to secure our border,” McClain said. “I owe it to my constituents and to Americans to take care of our house."

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