

# [***McConnell's exit as Senate leader means new uncertainty as GOP falls in line with Trump***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFB-YX11-JC5B-G1JB-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

WASHINGTON — Long before Sen. Mitch McConnell surprised colleagues Wednesday [*announcing he would step down*](https://apnews.com/article/mitch-mcconnell-senate-republican-leader-stepping-down-ba478d570a4561aa7baf91a204d7e366) as the Republican leader this fall, he knew the time had come.

Hard-right Republican senators aligned with [*Donald Trump*](https://apnews.com/hub/donald-trump) wanted to oust him. Trump was easily becoming the party's frontrunner for a do-over election with President [*Joe Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/joe-biden). And, having largely recovered his health from a devastating fall last year, McConnell was back on his game.

In assembling top aides in January to disclose his intentions, ahead of his 82nd birthday, McConnell told them he had just one more priority to secure: supplemental [*aid for Ukraine*](https://apnews.com/article/ukraine-aid-congress-border-israel-schumer-cfb8978287fa67712cc22028f9961af7) as it battles Russia.

“Believe me, I know the ***politics*** within my party at this particular moment in time,” McConnell said in a speech delivered midday Wednesday from the Senate floor.

His voice cracking at times, he said that's why he worked so hard to see the national security aid pass the Senate this month, insisting "America’s global leadership is essential” — even though the aid is still tied up in the House.

He said, “I have many faults, misunderstanding ***politics*** is not one of them.”

McConnell's departure leaves the Senate, and the Republican Party itself, at an uncertain crossroads, days before the Super Tuesday presidential [*primary elections*](https://apnews.com/hub/election-2024) when Trump is expected to sweep up more states in his march to the Republican Party nomination.

Trump's ascent proved to be an almost untenable political situation for McConnell — the two men have not spoken since December 2020, when McConnell declared that Biden had legally won that year's election. McConnell lashed out at the defeated president after the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, calling Trump “morally responsible” for the bloody siege. He has not yet endorsed Trump for president in 2024.

Like the House, where Republicans ousted Kevin McCarthy as speaker in fall, the latest in a growing list of GOP speakers sent prematurely to the exits, the Senate is now following suit in the Trump era, essentially leaving the long-serving McConnell with few options but to decide for himself it was time to go.

“I think it’ll be great, because I think Trump will win, we have a leader who can work well with the next Republican president,” said Sen. JD Vance of Ohio.

There was a time when few senators would dare criticize McConnell, a Ronald Reagan-era Republican first elected in 1984, who now controls a vast political operation that can make or break elections.

In fact, a majority of Republican senators still back McConnell's leadership, many heaping praise on the taciturn strategist who secured the Trump tax cuts in 2017 and led Senate confirmation of three justices to the Supreme Court, tilting its balance toward conservatives.

Behind closed doors, Republican senators gave McConnell a standing ovation during a private luncheon. Even some of McConnell’s biggest critics praised him after he spoke. Wisconsin Sen. Ron Johnson said it was a “poignant moment.”

Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., said while he thinks McConnell could have won another term if he sought one, he acknowledged the historic political shift underway in the GOP.

“I think the Republican Party is going through a pretty dramatic transition,” Rubio said. “And that’s obviously playing out in the halls of Congress as well.”

And increasingly emboldened detractors piled on Wednesday saying McConnell's leaving could not come fast enough — and in fact, he should step down before his announced November departure.

“This is a good development — my question is: Why wait so long?” said Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo.

Hawley said November is a long time away. “We need new leadership. Now.”

But it’s also highly unclear who will replace McConnell when he steps aside, as a trio of Republican senators in leadership roles known as the “three Johns” —- the No. 2 Republican John Thune of South Dakota, former whip John Cornyn of Texas and John Barrasso of Wyoming — have been vying for the job behind the scenes.

Thune told reporters that obviously McConnell's departure leaves “big shoes to fill,” but that now is a time “to reflect on his service and and honor him for that. And then we’ll we’ll go from there.”

Barrasso said he will be talking to fellow senators and listening to what they have to say about the "direction they want to take.”

And there could be other challengers. Republican Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, a millionaire former governor who had challenged McConnell for the top job last time, could also run again. He said he was focused on his own reelection in the fall, but “we’ll see what happens.”

The longest-serving Senate leader, McConnell helmed his party in both the majority and minority, and he has not tipped his hand on whom he wants to replace him. Leadership elections typically take place in November, after the national elections, with new leaders taking the helm with the new Congress in January.

Seen as a steely strategist who keeps his cards close to his vest, McConnell blindsided even allies with his sudden announcement.

Sen. Cynthia Lummis of Wyoming said she learned "about 15 seconds" before it happened — sitting in the chamber cloakroom when another colleague showed her the news on his phone.

Lost in the development is the fate of Ukraine aid as frontline troops run short of supplies to fight the Russian invasion and Trump encourages Congress to stop helping Kyiv.

McConnell secured Senate passage of the $95 billion national security supplemental for Ukraine, Israel and Indo-Pacific allies in an overwhelmingly bipartisan vote, a capstone in his long career.

But Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson refuses, for now, to reach across the aisle to Democrats to pass it.

Johnson, R-La., delivered his own tribute in a statement and said McConnell’s “legacy will endure for generations.”

House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries said he was confident McConnell would work “to ensure that the national security bill gets over the legislative finish line.”

For some time, McConnell's team has been in talks with Trump's campaign about a possible endorsement for the former president as the two seek to bridge their differences and unite the Republican Party ahead of the November elections.

McConnell believes senators will need to be aligned with the top of the ticket — likely Trump — if they hope to win enough seats to take majority control of the Senate. While McConnell has said he would endorse the eventual nominee, he remains the highest GOP leader in Congress who has yet to endorse Trump.

When asked if this is the end of an era for his wing of the GOP, retiring Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, once the Republican Party's presidential nominee himself, said, “The wing of the party that I represent is so small, it’s the size of a Tyrannosaurus Rex leg — arm.”

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Associated Press writer Kevin Freking contributed to this story.

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