

# [***Opinion: Mike Johnson is testing to see if the MAGA Republican fever can be broken***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BV2-R5W1-JBSS-S021-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; House Speaker Mike Johnson is [*moving forward with a legislative package*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/17/politics/mike-johnson-ukraine-aid/index.html) to provide aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan. Despite [*fierce opposition from MAGA Republicans*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/politics/mike-johnson-speakership-rules/index.html) within his caucus, Johnson has decided that the imperative of the US providing this assistance is more important than pleasing all the members of his caucus.

Without this support, international adversaries, including Russia, Iran and China, would read the failure of the US Congress to pass legislation as a sign that MAGA's America First agenda was triumphant. They might conclude that age of internationalism, entrenched into American ***politics*** since World War II, had come to an end.

The problem for Johnson is that his decision to move forward could very well cost him his job. Georgia Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene has been [*beating the drums*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/09/politics/marjorie-taylor-greene-johnson-ouster-threat/index.html) to vote Johnson, who is himself also an extreme right-wing Republican, out of office. With the new rules adopted by House Republicans when Rep. Kevin McCarthy of California was elected speaker last year, it only takes one member to trigger a vote to "[*vacate*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/18/politics/mike-johnson-speakership-rules/index.html)" the speakership.

When GOP House members adopted this lower threshold in exchange for accepting McCarthy, experts understood that the rule would create extreme instability within the Republican caucus. That proved true in October when McCarthy became the first speaker in American history who was [*voted out*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/matt-gaetz-kevin-mccarthy-house-speakership-10-03-23/index.html) of his position. With the low threshold whoever was speaker would always know that angering just one member could result in their downfall.

The rule was only one part of the challenge. Since we live in an era where there tend to be extremely narrow congressional majorities, party leaders find themselves in a position where just a few defections could render the passage of legislation impossible without bipartisan support. The choice for Republicans in the House has increasingly become doing nothing or working with Democrats to get things done.

Yet Republican speakers can't really turn to the second option without immense risk. As the Republican Party has [*shifted dramatically*](https://www.hachettebookgroup.com/titles/thomas-e-mann/its-even-worse-than-it-looks/9780465096206/?lens=basic-books) to the right in recent decades there is very little appetite on the red side of the aisle to enter into any kind of deal with the other side. The resistance is both political, for fear of giving the Democrats any kind of victory that could help them gain the majority, and ideological, given that many in the GOP claim that anything their opponents want constitutes a fundamental threat to the country.

While Democrats too have also [*veered toward the left*](https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/why-the-democrats-have-shifted-left-over-the-last-30-years/#:~:text=Perhaps%20unsurprisingly%2C%20in%20recent%20years,of%20the%20broader%20leftward%20shift.), the party remains much more ideologically and politically diverse. There is still more tolerance for sometimes working with the other side. This was evident when New York Senator Chuck Schumer and House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries showed willingness [*to support*](https://www.politico.com/news/2023/10/10/schumer-jeffries-migrant-crisis-divides-ny-democrats-00120372) the stringent bipartisan immigration deal that House Republicans ultimately subverted at the [*behest*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/live-news/senate-vote-border-bill-aid-02-07-24/index.html#:~:text=Senate%20Republicans%20blocked%20the%20legislation,the%20first%20time%20in%20decades.) of former president and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.

The new generation of Republicans have almost no tolerance for leaders who don't follow their command.

All of this is made worse by the fact that Republicans have become a political party that has little room for strong, independent leadership. For decades, there has been a willingness to throw leaders overboard rather than providing them with the leeway congressional leaders have historically needed to govern.

The trend started as a Republican strategy against Democrats. In 1989, House Minority Leader Newt Gingrich [*led the way*](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/07/books/review/burning-down-the-house-julian-zelizer.html) when he toppled Democratic Speaker Jim Wright through an ethics scandal that resulted in Wright's resignation. Although Wright warned colleagues to avoid the "mindless cannibalism" that he feared was sweeping the chamber, conditions only became worse.

In the era since 1994, when Republicans have held control of the House numerous times, they have frequently turned on themselves. In 1998, Republicans pressured Gingrich into [*relinquishing*](https://www.nytimes.com/1998/11/07/us/the-speaker-steps-down-the-career-the-fall-of-gingrich-an-irony-in-an-odd-year.html) his speakership because the party did poorly in the midterms - as they were impeaching President Bill Clinton - and since Gingrich was having an [*affair*](https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=2937633&page=1). Gingrich's successor, Louisiana's Rep. Robert Livingston, [*stepped down*](https://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/time/1998/12/21/livingston.html) before even becoming speaker because of his own affair.

Although Rep. Dennis Hastert of Illinois would retain the speakership from 1999 to 2007 (he would [*end*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/victim-testifies-that-dennis-hastert-sexually-abused-him-as-a-17-year-old-boy-i-was-devastated/2016/04/27/b38791ea-07ef-11e6-b283-e79d81c63c1b_story.html) his career as a convicted felon and sex offender), Republican speakers are always on thin ice. Hastert's relative longevity was the exception. Rep. John Boehner of Ohio, who helped Tea Party Republicans [*win office in 2010*](https://www.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/11/03/election.house/index.html), struggled with young colleagues, one of whom he later called a "legislative terrorist," (fellow Ohio Congressman Jim Jordan), thought he was too open to compromise.

On July 28, 2015, Tea Party Republican Rep. Mark Meadows from North Carolina [*filed a motion*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/07/28/rep-mark-meadows-makes-bid-to-oust-boehner-from-speakership/) to vacate but the House never voted on the resolution. Nonetheless, the pressure was so intense that in September of that year Boehner resigned. "My first job as speaker," he [*said*](https://www.forbes.com/sites/kellyphillipserb/2015/09/25/fix-the-tax-code-friday-averting-a-shutdown/?sh=1ca8f71a7ddc), "is to protect the institution. It had become clear to me that this prolonged leadership turmoil would do irreparable harm to the institution." Of course, Boehner only had himself to blame as he had been part of the Gingrich generation [*that promoted*](https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/books/review/on-the-house-john-boehner-memoir.html) smashmouth partisanship and opened the doors to Tea Party Republicans who he saw as useful and believed he could control.

Boehner was [*followed by Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan*](https://www.cnn.com/2015/10/29/politics/paul-ryan-house-speaker-vote/index.html). As speaker, Ryan unsuccessfully tried to change what he called the [*"weapon"*](https://www.vox.com/2015/10/22/9600610/paul-ryan-speaker)of the ability of members to vacate the speakership and spent his four years unable to control the creeping extremism of his colleagues. His [*tenure ended in 2019*](https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/03/politics/nancy-pelosi-house-speaker-vote-new-congress/index.html) after Democrats retook control of the chamber.

Elected as speaker in 2023, McCarthy [*only held the seat*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/03/politics/house-speaker-shortest-kevin-mccarthy-dg/index.html) for 269 days before the GOP voted him out for working with Democrats to keep the government open. His became the third shortest speakership in American history, only longer than Speaker Michael Kerr who passed away in the middle of his term (1876) and Speaker Theodore Pomeroy who was elected in 1869, the final day of the 40th Congress.

The time of Republican speakership [*keeps shrinking*](https://www.axios.com/2024/04/17/house-speaker-mike-johnson-short-tenure) as right-wing ousters have become increasingly common. In a party that has become hyperpolarized, respect for stability, governance and compromise has gone out the window. Republican speakers have to toe the line. If they don't, they are likely to be shown the exit.

The long and short-term changes have produced a party in the House of Representatives that is almost incapable of producing strong leaders, rendering the GOP unstable, toxic and destructive. But the costs are not just internal.

A functional House depends on having two parties that can maintain some internal order and deliver when it comes to deal-making. Functionality depends on two parties with strong leaders that are ultimately committed to governance as a shared central goal.

When this imperative breaks down within one party, as we are seeing in 2024, the risks to the nation increase as each speaker in the GOP must confront the choice of moving forward with legislation that is in the interest of most of the chamber or relinquishing their power. It has become an either-or proposition.

Johnson is now testing the waters to see if the fever can be broken.

Opinion by Julian Zelizer, CNN

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