

# [***Opinion: Mitch McConnell's unconditional surrender***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFG-9N71-DY7V-G0TF-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Mitch McConnell bowed to political reality Wednesday and announced that he would [*endorse Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/mitch-mcconnell-endorses-trump/index.html)'s White House bid, a final act of capitulation to the soon-to-be Republican presidential nominee who has vanquished all comers challenging his dominance in the party.

McConnell [*announced*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/28/politics/mitch-mcconnell-stepping-down-leadership-senate-gop/index.html) last week that he would be relinquishing his role as leader of Senate Republicans, one of the most powerful positions in Washington, in what many interpreted as another nod to Trump's pre-eminence.

"It is abundantly clear that former President Trump has earned the requisite support of Republican voters to be our nominee for President of the United States," McConnell said in a statement. "It should come as no surprise that as nominee, he will have my support."

In his speech delivered on the Senate floor last week, McConnell he mentioned the tragedy that recently struck his family with the death of his sister-in-law, sister to his wife Elaine Chao. (Chao served as transportation secretary under former President Donald Trump, before quitting the post following the January 6, 2021 attack on the US Capitol.)

McConnell noted as well that he had just turned 82 and suggested that his time at the helm had simply run out. "One of life's most underappreciated talents is to know when it's time to move on to life's next chapter," he said.

It's also important to take note of the recent health challenges McConnell has faced - including episodes in which he [*froze mid-sentence*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/31/politics/mitch-mcconnell-health/index.html) in front of television cameras - which might also have hastened his decision to step aside.

But make no mistake: McConnell's endorsement on Wednesday and last week's announcement that he's leaving his powerful perch also reflects his realization that he is no longer in step with his increasingly fractious and [*Trump-oriented Republican caucus*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/07/opinions/mitch-mcconnell-senate-republicans-border-bill-zelizer/index.html). Both developments come just a few weeks after McConnell suffered an embarrassingly large number of defections on a vote he had backed to fund aid to Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan.

A clear-eyed assessment of the political landscape surely would have accelerated his decision. McConnell didn't overtly say so, but it wasn't hard to read the message between the lines of his speech last week. "Believe me, I know the ***politics*** within my party at this particular time. I have many faults. Misunderstanding ***politics*** is not one of them," he told his fellow senators.

McConnell's education about the changes has not been subtle. In addition to his difficulty moving funding for Ukraine through his own caucus, he has been the target of Trump's invectives for years. The former president has called him a "piece of s\*\*t" and mocked him as an "old crow." [*Nor has his wife been safe*](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-13127815/Mitch-McConnell-Trump-endorsement-2024.html) from Trump's merciless barbs. The Kentucky senator, for his part, has greatly displeased the former president by [*withholding - at least so far - an endorsement*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/26/us/politics/trump-mcconnell-endorsement.html) of his presidential candidacy.

His decision to cede the Senate minority leader's position should provide a clear answer to skeptics who doubted that the MAGA wing of the GOP had reached a tipping point in terms of the power it wields in the upper chamber of Congress. No one should doubt Trump and his acolytes, whose political muscle has led to a takeover of the GOP. The former President's romp through the primary election season, all but securing the Republican presidential nomination, is another sign of this indomitable position in the party.

The truth is now painfully apparent: Trump and the GOP are one and the same. The anti-Trump coalition within the Republican Party is small and [*hanging on*](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-romps-wins-anti-trump-republicans-wonder-do-i-still-have-political-home-2024-02-24/) by a thread, and there is little chance of that changing in the short term. Every major figure who tries to take on the Trump-oriented GOP faction ends up losing. Now add McConnell to the list of the vanquished.

A wily Republican partisan who has shown no reluctance over the years to weaponize the levers of power, as well as a stalwart defender of a conservative agenda, McConnell was no match for Trump and his party's brash young upstarts. The former president and the rest of what once was the anti-establishment are now the new Republican establishment.

And yet, McConnell has had no shortage of triumphs over the years. As a result of his tough approach to judicial confirmations - including, famously, his refusal to take up the Supreme Court nomination of Merrick Garland, then-President Barack Obama's pick for a vacant seat on the high court - McConnell has been largely responsible for the conservative shift on the federal courts.

When SCOTUS knocked down Roe v. Wade in its Dobbs decision last year, McConnell had achieved his ultimate goal. As fellow Senate conservative Lindsey Graham [*succinctly put it,*](https://san.com/cc/senate-republicans-praise-mcconnell-for-impact-on-federal-judiciary/) "through sheer force of will, he has shaped the federal judiciary in a conservative fashion."

Taking a far less sanguine view of McConnell's legacy, Sen. Dick Durbin bemoaned the way he has reshaped the courts. "Probably the most lasting political move he's made as a leader - changing the Supreme Court - has resulted in [overturning] Roe v. Wade. Now, we live in the Dobbs era, and we see the chaos that's created."

But despite that crowning achievement by McConnell, the party now belongs to Trump. He [*has been able to move Republican*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/28/mcconnell-steps-down-trump-republican-party/) party positions on foreign policy and the budget wars, and has shown he is willing to withdraw the US from the world, while playing brinkmanship with the fiscal stability of the country - all in pursuit of more power.

Trump also has been a staunch opponent of funding for Ukraine, skeptical about the importance of NATO, and stoked Republicans in Congress to weaponize the debt ceiling in budget negotiations. Just as the Tea Party supplanted Newt Gingrich's generation of Republicans, who had already shifted the GOP to the right, now the MAGA wing is doing the same.

Former UN Ambassador Nikki Haley learned the same hard lessons as McConnell, although her [*ability to win the support of a sizable minority of voters*](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/20/us/politics/haley-not-dropping-out.html) in the presidential primaries and caucuses was impressive, and for a while gave a home to those who want to move in a different direction other than following the former president.

But the bottom line is that Haley, who [*suspended her quest*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/06/politics/nikki-haley-2024-presidential-race/index.html) for the nomination on Wednesday, continued to lose in state after state, while Trump kept winning. Despite an enormous flood of donor cash and the consolidation of the non-Trump vote behind her, she couldn't even win in her own home state of South Carolina last week.

So, it's all but official: The Republican party belongs to Donald Trump. Any illusion that that will change anytime soon and that the party will revert back to the way it was in the pre-MAGA era should be seen as just that.

The new reality of ***politics*** in Washington favors instability and dysfunction. One of our two major parties - the Grand Old Party - will continue to play partisan ***politics***, without adhering to any kind of rulebook and they will keep pushing the policy agenda even further to the right.

It's now up to voters in November's general election to demonstrate whether they believe our democracy can sustain this fraught and chaotic new status quo in our ***politics***.

Opinion by Julian Zelizer

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