

# [***From doubter to devotee: How New York's Elise Stefanik emerged as a top Trump ally***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BD4-RBS1-DY7V-G04R-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; As some Republicans were agonizing over the party's disappointing 2022 midterm election performance - and occasionally laying the blame at the feet of former President Donald Trump - New York Rep. [*Elise Stefanik*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/07/politics/elise-stefanik-january-6-prisoners-liz-cheney/index.html) tripled down.

Shortly after Election Day, Stefanik, now the fourth-ranking House Republican and a top GOP fundraiser, endorsed Trump's reelection bid - before he formally announced it himself - and called on her party to "to unite around the most popular Republican in America."

Nearly 15 months later, Stefanik's message is the same. And she is delivering it with increasing urgency amid rumors that she's on Trump's shortlist as a potential running mate. In a speech at the Conservative Political Action Conference on Friday, Stefanik mentioned Trump no fewer than 25 times as she sought to tie her fate to his.

"They underestimate President Donald J. Trump every single day, and I'm proud to say they have underestimated me at every turn," Stefanik said. "I will never underestimate the power of you. Because I know, like President Donald J. Trump knows, that we work for you."

Stefanik's early move to back Trump brought some political risk, but for the 39-year-old, the potential rewards clearly outweighed the downside, and her decision did not land as much of a surprise.

The New Yorker had for years been one of [*Trump's staunchest supporters*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/19/politics/trump-campaign-surrogates/index.html), first and most memorably with an aggressive performance during his 2019 impeachment hearings and then, more lastingly, after his 2020 defeat, when she objected to Joe Biden's win in the House and promoted Trump's election lies. More recently, she made headlines with her campaign to oust college leaders who did not, as she and others saw it, adequately denounce antisemitism during a House hearing on the matter. (Claudine Gay, the president of Stefanik's alma mater, Harvard University, eventually resigned.)

[*The about-face*](https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/07/politics/kfile-elise-stefanik-trump-comments/index.html) from earlier in the decade was jarring to many around her. A self-styled "independent voice" who had evinced a moderate persona, she'd previously won high praise from former House Speaker Paul Ryan, an establishment hero and longtime ally, who wrote in Time Magazine that Stefanik was a "builder - no easy feat in an age when so much of ***politics*** is about tearing people down."

Her turn from Trump skeptic - and occasional outright critic - during the 2016 presidential campaign and into the early days of his presidency, to one of his most vocal defenders became the stuff of deeply reported, chin-stroking features.

The reality, though, was less of a mystery.

Stefanik has often explained it herself: She saw Trump's popularity in her upstate New York district and got on board. That first impeachment proceeding made her a "Republican star," as Trump himself said at the time. From there, she's become an influential member of the MAGA elite. And with Trump now poised to secure his third consecutive GOP presidential nomination, Stefanik is among a handful of potential running mates, a role for which she is openly jockeying.

"I'm proud to be a top surrogate," Stefanik said earlier this month on CNN. "I would proudly serve in a future Trump administration."

It's a lofty, but ultimately pragmatic ambition.

Stefanik did not seek the speakership, a seemingly doomed position, during her GOP colleagues' protracted battles over replacing the deposed and now former California Rep. Kevin McCarthy. Her home state of New York, though perhaps more welcoming for Republicans than five or 10 years ago, is still unlikely to elect a Republican governor anytime soon.

Seeking the vice presidency or, failing that, a high-ranking Cabinet position, appears to offer Stefanik the smoothest potential ascent. She is widely considered one of the favorites, along with Ohio Sen. J.D. Vance, Arizona Senate candidate Kari Lake, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem and Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, Trump's second White House press secretary.

Trump has at various times asked donors and allies what they think about Stefanik as a potential vice president, though her perceived zeal for the job, as one person close to Trump described it, has begun to turn off some of the former president's advisers.

On Friday, Stefanik will take one of the biggest microphones in right-wing ***politics***, when she addresses the Conservative Political Action Conference, or CPAC, just outside Washington, DC. Trump will be there on Saturday. Former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, his last standing Republican primary rival, will not.

Other prominent speakers include Noem; Vance; Lake; former housing secretary Ben Carson; and conservative House members like Jim Jordan of Ohio and Florida's Matt Gaetz. Steve Bannon and Vivek Ramaswamy, a failed GOP primary candidate who pledged his support to Trump immediately after dropping out - and, on occasion, before he left the race - are also on the slate.

A 'great defender'

Stefanik's rise among the Trump partisans has been among the swiftest and most scrutinized in all American ***politics***. Democrats and other political opponents have derided her as "#TrashyStefanik" on social media while anti-Trump Republicans often point to her as evidence of Trump's corrosive effect on both GOP and national ***politics***.

For his part, Trump considers Stefanik's shift from detractor to defender a feather in his cap, and has come to view her as once of his most crucial allies in the House - something he publicly praised her for as recently as last week.

During a fundraiser for his 2024 campaign at his Mar-a-Lago resort last Friday, Trump repeatedly thanked Stefanik during his remarks and asked her stand up while calling her a "great defender" of him, two attendees told CNN.

The two speak on a regular basis, Stefanik and Trump aides told CNN, and he's often turned to the New York congresswoman to help lobby her House GOP colleagues to do his bidding on issues relating to congressional investigations, government funding and foreign policy.

She also possessed a trait deemed incredibly important to Trump: being an effective communicator on television. Her TV interviews during his two impeachment trials initially helped raise her stock in the eyes of the former president.

Indeed, she has become one of the most vocal supporters of Trump - both the candidate and the political brand - in Congress. When there was a nationwide baby formula shortage in 2022, Stefanik blamed the "White House, House Dems, & usual pedo grifters" on social media. (She never attempted to back up the outrageous pedophilia charge.)

In 2021, before a planned rally for January 6 riot defendants, Stefanik, who has baselessly blamed former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi for the insurrection, came under fire for an online campaign ad that appeared to channel the racist "[*great replacement theory*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/20/us/replacement-theory-white-supremacist-buffalo-shooter/index.html)."

"Radical Democrats are planning their most aggressive move yet: a PERMANENT ELECTION INSURRECTION," said one version of the ad. "Their plan to grant amnesty to 11 MILLION illegal immigrants will overthrow our current electorate and create a permanent liberal majority in Washington."

A Stefanik spokesperson disputed the critical characterizations, saying the congresswoman, "despite sickening and false reporting," "has never advocated for any racist position or made a racist statement."

Stefanik faced some headwinds last year among Republicans, particularly donors, over her role in vouching for disgraced and now-expelled Rep. George Santos during his 2022 congressional campaign.

One upset donor told CNN in 2023 that he gave to Santos "because of Elise Stefanik's endorsement." Stefanik frequently denied any previous knowledge of his Santos' history.

"Congresswoman Stefanik supported all GOP nominees in targeted New York seats just like every other New York Republican elected official, candidate, NRCC, NYGOP, and the entire House Republican leadership team," a Stefanik campaign spokesperson told CNN at the time, adding that Stefanik was not "aware of the allegations (against Santos) prior to the New York Times reporting" after the election.

But multiple Republican operatives in Washington and New York told CNN that they found it implausible that Stefanik was not aware of Santos' falsehoods, given the rumors about him had been circulating since at least the summer of 2021.

"Stefanik's team was laser focused on electing Santos to Congress - more than just about any other race in the country," said a senior Republican strategist involved in campaigns before the midterms.

For all the frustration among Republicans over the Santos saga, particularly with freshman GOP members from New York who flipped nearby seats during the same election, Trump has not seemed to mind. After the initial blowback, Stefanik successfully kept her distance from the mess. (She was one of 114 votes against expelling him from Congress late last year.)

In the last couple weeks, Stefanik has become increasingly active in support of Trump. Early last week, she filed a complaint against New York Attorney General Letitia James over the Democrat's civil fraud case against the former president - a step she had previously taken against judges overseeing other Trump cases.

A few days later, she posted pictures from a fundraising event at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida.

"The American people stand with President Trump," Stefanik wrote, "against the unethical, unconstitutional, and unprecedented weaponization of the judicial system."

This story has been updated with additional reporting.

CNN's Alayna Treene, Kit Maher and Aaron Pellish contributed to this story.

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