

# [***In wake of McConnell's exit plan, a fight over the future of the Senate GOP takes shape***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BFB-T101-JBSS-S50C-00000-00&context=1516831)

CNN Wire

February 29, 2024 Thursday 00:01Invalid date found for VDI: L19jb21wb25lbnRzL2FydGljbGUvaW5zdGFuY2VzL2NsdDZmMmxwZjAwMjVuYm54MTQ1aDcxOTY XCEDOCID: 2 LNI: 6BFB-T101-JBSS-S50C-00000-00. Date output 'as-is'.GMT

Copyright 2024 Cable News Network All Rights Reserved

**Length:** 954 words

**Byline:** By Lauren Fox and Ted Barrett, CNN

**Dateline:** (CNN)

**Body**

A powerful counterweight to former President Donald Trump is exiting stage left from Republican leadership and leaving in his wake a major showdown over the future of the party.

Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's [*decision to step aside*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/28/politics/mitch-mcconnell-stepping-down-leadership-senate-gop/index.html) as the longest serving Senate leader in history comes as Republicans are at an inflection point: former President Donald Trump and his isolationist-tinged foreign policy is once again ascending, at odd with McConnell's vision. The right-wing of the Republican conference in the House already ousted one speaker and has extracted more power in a narrow majority. Even conservatives in McConnell's own ranks have become emboldened to attack him publicly and often.

It has Republicans reflecting on what happens to the party in the months ahead and has some weighing whether they can fit into a GOP that is more modeled after Trump than the Reagan-Republicanism McConnell embodies.

"I wonder that every day," said Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a Republican from Alaska.

Asked if she'd be open to becoming an independent, Murkowski didn't take it off the table.

"That's not something I am prepared to discuss in terms of where I am, but I am watching very carefully what we are seeing with the party and the party's choices and with where Republicans are leaning," Murkowski said. "And, I am clearly not one who is following the Trump path at all. So again, it is not about Lisa Murkowski. It is like what is our party right now?"

McConnell won't step aside until November and even then, he will remain in the Senate as a rank-and-file member. But the fight for the next leader is sure to expose the fractures within the Republican conference and its allegiance to Trump and force members to reckon with what their party will be in the wake of a powerful and longstanding leader.

"That will give us time to sort all of this out," said Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, a Republican from West Virginia. " I think everything is pretty fluid right now."

"It's an interesting discussion we've been having among ourselves," said Sen. Roger Marshall, a Republican from Kansas. "We're seeing this populist brand of conservatism rise to the top."

Some Republicans dismiss the existential question about the party's future without McConnell as leader, arguing he's only one person in a party where many members still believe in the US role on the global stage and believe in the basic functions of governing.

"I don't see it moving dramatically." Sen. Joni Ernst, a Republican from Iowa, said of the party's future direction on foreign policy. "There's a whole new generation of us that will keep that up."

But the reality is support in the Senate for Ukraine aid has dwindled over the last two years, a hard fought compromise on immigration crashed and burned in hours after a stern warning from Trump and five months into the fiscal year, funding the government remains a struggle due to divisions in the House.

"Always the party is bigger than the single person. So we'll get together and move forward as we have," said Sen. Jim Risch, a Republican from Idaho and the top ranking Republican on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "I really don't think it changes things."

Sen. Thom Tillis, a Republican from North Carolina, said it's up to "those who are gonna stick around" to define the future of the GOP and if McConnell were to want to stick around as leader, he could win, symbolizing that most members still back his philosophy of conservatism.

"Mitch isn't going anywhere. His term ends the same year as mine does. I think we gotta carry on," Tillis said. "I think people will step up. Good leaders will step up."

For decades, McConnell was considered a reliable conservative in the mold of Ronald Reagan whose command of Senate procedure and hardball tactics helped the GOP gain a conservative majority on the Supreme Court, helped pass a Republican tax bill and continued to champion the US' role around the world.

But, in recent years, the party shifted closer to Trump's vision and further from McConnell's. The GOP leader's nonexistent relationship with Trump in the wake of the January 6, 2021, attack on the US Capitol, paired with his willingness to negotiate with Democrats on domestic policy issues like gun control and immigration, has left him - at times - at odds among many within his own party and conference.

"Believe me, I know the ***politics*** within my party at this particular moment in time," McConnell said in his floor speech Wednesday. "I have many faults. Misunderstanding ***politics*** is not one of them."

McConnell's detractors and longtime critics applauded the news Wednesday, ready to turn the page and move toward a brand of conservatism they argue will more closely align the Senate GOP with voters back home.

"I appreciate the fact that he's announced it now to give our conference the time to really sit down and decide what our mission needs to be. What are our goals?" asked Sen. Ron Johnson, a Republican from Wisconsin.

And those aligned with Trump warn whoever the next leader will need to have a far more functional relationship with the Republican front-runner for the White House than McConnell had.

"I think its pretty clear Donald Trump is the largest force in the Republican Party. There is no mystery there," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina. "The next majority leaders in January - I think we'll be in the majority and I think Trump will be president - will have to be somebody who can work with Trump, but also all factions of the party."

CNN's Manu Raju and Morgan Rimmer contributed to this report.

By Lauren Fox and Ted Barrett, CNN

TM & © 2024 Cable News Network, Inc., a Time Warner Company. All rights reserved.

**Load-Date:** February 28, 2024

**End of Document**