

# [***How Johnson wooed Trump to back a GOP congressman targeted by Gaetz***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6BDJ-W8R1-JBSS-S41D-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

Speaker Mike Johnson and his top lieutenants had a mission last week when they made a trek to Mar-a-Lago: Secure a Donald Trump endorsement for an incumbent House Republican over an insurgent primary rival boosted by Rep. Matt Gaetz.

According to multiple GOP sources, Johnson lobbied Trump to back Republican Rep. Mike Bost against his MAGA-aligned primary foe, Darren Bailey, in the southern Illinois district - a sign of how the new speaker is leveraging his relationship with the former president as internal GOP primary battles threaten to reshape the makeup of Congress.

Other Republicans alsopersonally urged Trump to supportBost - including Rep. Richard Hudson of North Carolina, who heads the House GOP's campaign arm and was present for the Mar-a-Lago meeting with Trump, and Rep. Max Miller, a freshman from Ohio and ex-Trump aide. The former president announced his endorsement of Bost just one day after the brief visit from Johnson and Hudson, who were in Florida for an annual House GOP leadership retreat.

As Republicans made the pitch on why they believed Bost - a loyal Trump supporter, committee chairman and five-term incumbent - deserved the backing of the former president, some hoped another message would effectively be delivered to Gaetz: That the House GOP would not be remade in his mold, a sign of the lingering bad blood more than four months after the Florida Republican led the unprecedented charge to [*oust Kevin McCarthy from the speakership*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/02/politics/matt-gaetz-kevin-mccarthy-speakership/index.html).

"Seeing as how President Trump endorsed Mike Bost, Matt always finds himself on the wrong side of history," Miller told CNN. "He wants more chaos. He has mommy and daddy issues to work out."

Gaetz took a swipe at Miller, and said in an interview there was a reason why he just stumped for Bailey in Herrin, Illinois and is maneuvering to oust his GOP colleague from Congress.

"Look, I'm on a mission to change Congress, and I can't do it with the people who are currently here," Gaetz told CNN. "I've come to that conclusion. So I need new people. I need better people. I need better options in a lot of these Republican primaries. And I'll be traveling the country to try to get more people elected."

The party-wide push to protect Bost - which GOP sources say also included a Johnson-hosted fundraiser for Bost in his district in December - is not fueled by concerns over losing the ruby-red seat if a far-right candidate emerges victorious in the Republican primary. Instead, the calculation is more centered around the fact that Bost, a member of the center-right Main Street Caucus, is viewed as a leadership ally who tends to support the party's agenda, according to lawmakers familiar with internal GOP dynamics - a far cry from the Gaetz wing of the party that is frequently at war with party leaders over tactics.

Since taking the speaker's gavel in October, Johnson has traveled to nearly two dozen states, including to help other GOP incumbents, as he works to grow the majority this November, according to Johnson's political team.

Yet Republican leaders could also sell a Bost endorsement to Trump because he's seen as a loyal supporter of the former president - a sign of his enduring grip on the House GOP and party's base.

In an interview, Bost made clear he sees a different reason why Gaetz is targeting him: A personal vendetta.

Amid the battle over the speakership last fall, Gaetz "started screaming from the middle of the room" at McCarthy, according to Bost, who was part of a group that then yelled at Gaetz and told him to sit down. Bost later lunged at him in the room, according to multiple witnesses.

"As Matt does, he wants to be the center of attention, and that's why he does the things like he's doing right now to me," Bost said in an interview.

Bost added: "He's not liked in my district. Matter of fact, it may gain me votes by him coming there."

Gaetz insisted that his campaign against Bost - the third time he has targeted a sitting Republican while serving in Congress - "isn't personal," pointing instead to Bost's past support for aiding Ukraine and calling him a member who is "bought and paid for by the lobbyists and the special interests."

"I don't fight those things out with my fists in some sort of strange brawl," Gaetz said. "I fight with my words, and that's what I will be doing in Illinois."

But behind the scenes, Bost has taken steps to make clear where his loyalty lies. Bost and his wife used to send prayer cards from his constituents to the then-president, which Trump once brought up to Bost during a flight on Air Force One and thanked him for doing, according to a member who was on the plane.

Trump looms over other key primaries

The maneuvering to win Trump's support underscores the GOP reality: No one can sway congressional primaries like the former president. Indeed, Sen. Steve Daines of Montana, the Senate GOP's campaign chairman, laid the groundwork for months to get Trump to back the Republican leadership's preferred candidate in the crucial US Senate race in Montana, [*effectively nudging out hard-right Rep. Matt Rosendale*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/15/politics/matt-rosendale-montana-senate/index.html) whom party bosses feared could have cost them the seat.

And in House and Senate GOP primaries across the country, loyalty to Trump is still a dominant issue as candidates court conservative voters - despite his political vulnerabilities with many general election voters as well [*as his 91 criminal charges across four indictments.*](https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2023/07/politics/trump-indictments-criminal-cases/)

The battle for Trump's stamp of approval has played prominently in the primary fight to represent Ohio's 9th Congressional District, a Democratic seat that Republicans view as a clear pickup opportunity. After the GOP leadership's candidate, Craig Riedel, was caught on tape criticizing Trump, multiple Republicans pulled their endorsement, including Miller and House GOP Conference Chairwoman Elise Stefanik.

Party leaders then scrambled to recruit a new candidate who was seen as both sufficiently pro-Trump and a viable general election candidate. Ultimately, they settled on Derek Merrin, whom they believe fits that bill, and Johnson endorsed Merrin last month.

While Trump has not gotten involved in the Ohio primary race, some of his allies have. Gaetz, Rep. Byron Donalds of Florida and Sen. JD Vance of Ohio have all endorsed Republican JR Majewski, [*a controversial candidate*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/08/politics/kfile-jr-majewski-jan-6-qanon-material/index.html) who handily lost in 2022 against the Democratic incumbent, Rep. Marcy Kaptur, and whom many Republicans fear would cost them the race again.

Trump has roiled previous primary races that have had implications for the GOP's so-called governing wing. Last cycle, Trump endorsed Rep. Mary Miller of Illinois, a House Freedom Caucus hardliner who was challenging fellow incumbent Rep. Rodney Davis, a Main Street Caucus member, after the state's maps were redrawn.

Miller ultimately won the race, knocking out Davis, who was viewed as a leadership ally and pragmatic member of the conference. And now, Miller is inserting herself into another incumbent primary race in Illinois: She also is backing Bailey over Bost, her House GOP colleague. (Bost endorsed Davis instead of Miller in the 2022 race.)

In her endorsement, Miller cited Bailey's MAGA credentials and her close personal relationship with the candidate. But this time, Miller and Gaetz are on the opposite side of Trump in the race.

"There's a big difference between Mike and me. I was not 100% loyal to Donald Trump. And it cost me," Davis told CNN. "But that's not going to happen to Mike. He now has the Trump endorsement, which is basically a nail in the coffin to Darren Bailey."

Bailey's campaign downplayed the Trump endorsement, arguing it's just an example of the former president seeking to boost GOP incumbents and noting that Trump offered praise for Bailey in his official statement backing Bost.

"Darren Bailey proudly stands with President Trump despite disagreeing with him on this endorsement," a campaign spokesman said. "We look forward to working with President Trump to champion working families, secure our borders, defend our freedoms, and put America First - no compromises, no apologies."

House GOP anger at Gaetz

Gaetz told CNN that he chose to get involved in the Bost race now because the March primary is early on the calendar, noting he is weighing targeting other GOP incumbents as well.

"You may see me pop up around the country more and more," Gaetz said. "And as we get to other states that are later in the primary cycle, I may be endorsing in some of those as well."

But Gaetz has already gained many enemies within the House GOP after leading the ouster of McCarthy from the speakership, something his legions of critics believe was based simply on a personal beef, which Gaetz denies. And now his efforts to take out his colleague in his primary is only adding fuel to the fire.

"I don't like it," Rep. Carlos Gimenez, a Florida Republican said of Gaetz campaigning against Bost. "You know it's a colleague campaigning against another colleague. And that to me is not a very smart move. Now we are going to have to fight to keep the majority. And in the House, the majority is not everything, it's the only thing. And maybe some people still don't understand that."

Added Rep. Don Bacon, a swing district Nebraska Republican: "I try to be careful about criticizing our own members but we should support incumbents. And the norm, since I've been here, you don't get involved in someone else's primary. It should be the norm because it creates long-term divisions in the conference."

Bost said the feud is "really sad."

"I came into ***politics*** under the old Reagan rule - the 11th Commandment of no badmouthing Republicans," Bost said. "But there's a whole pile of them now."

But Gaetz shrugged off the criticism.

"I would say Republicans need to start acting like Republicans again," Gaetz said. "And then they'd have nothing to fear."

CNN's Sam Fossum, Morgan Rimmer and Christine Park contributed to this report.

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