

# [***Opinion: McConnell appears to be politically weakened. This senator may be waiting in the wings***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B8W-JNH1-DY7V-G01N-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; Editor's note: [*Julian Zelizer*](https://twitter.com/julianzelizer), a CNN political analyst, is a professor of history and public affairs at Princeton University. He is the author and editor of 25 books, including The New York Times bestseller "[*Myth America: Historians Take on the Biggest Lies and Legends About Our Past*](https://www.basicbooks.com/titles/kevin-m-kruse/myth-america/9781541601390/)" (Basic Books). The views expressed in this commentary are his own. View [*more opinion*](https://www.cnn.com/opinions) on CNN.

Mitch McConnell's future as leader of Senate Republicans seems in greater danger than at any time in recent memory. The minority leader's recent health struggles - convalescing for several weeks last year after [*becoming concussed from a fall*](https://www.cnn.com/2023/07/27/politics/mitch-mcconnell-multiple-falls-this-year/index.html) and suffering mid-sentence "freezing" episodes - already raised questions about whether a changing of the guard was imminent. McConnell for his part has always [*dismissed concerns*](https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/06/us/politics/mcconnell-leadership-senate.html#:~:text=McConnell%2C%20who%20appeared%20notably%20thinner,bed%20any%20%E2%80%9Creasonable%20questions.%E2%80%9D) about his health.

Now McConnell is facing rumblings from within his Senate Republican caucus over the collapse of a congressional border deal that also provides assistance to Ukraine and Israel. The border security measure, part of a deal hammered out over weeks with Democrats, was torpedoed by an unforgiving cadre of former President Donald Trump acolytes in the US Congress who have pushed the GOP further to the right. These legislators practice a smash mouth style of partisan ***politics*** and are not averse to bringing the entire government to a grinding halt to make a purely political point.

Over the years, McConnell has not done much to contain the power of the growing ranks of extremist Republicans in the Senate, confident that he could rein them in - until he couldn't. Prominent among the anti-McConnell faction in Congress is Texas Sen. Ted Cruz, who is going after the GOP leader with hammer and tongs. After McConnell admitted this week that the [*border deal was doomed*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/politics/biden-border-bill/index.html) to failure, Cruz [*declared that it was time for his colleague to go*](https://thehill.com/homenews/senate/4451239-cruz-says-its-time-for-mcconnell-to-step-down-as-gop-leader/).

In 2024, House Republicans would like to see a more aggressive leader heading the Senate GOP caucus and there can be little doubt that Cruz is trying out for the job. It was at least the second time in the past year-and-a-half that the [*Texas senator has called for the ouster of McConnell*](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/15/politics/ted-cruz-mitch-mcconnell-senate-republicans/index.html), who has been taking the attacks in stride. "I think we can all agree that Sen. Cruz is not a fan," [*the Republican leader quipped*](https://twitter.com/mkraju/status/1754965493016900095) when asked on Tuesday about Cruz's comments.

The collapse of the bipartisan border deal comes as no surprise to political observers, but it is nonetheless stunning, in part because the draft legislation appeared to be a massive victory for the hardline right. The agreement, crafted by Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, was exactly the deal that conservative Republicans have been asking for since at least the early 2000s. It managed to keep Democratic priorities, [*such as a pathway to citizenship*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/06/politics/border-security-bill-senate-explained-cec/index.html), out of the measure. [*The bill would expedite the asylum screening process*](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/02/06/congress-border-security-bill-ukraine/41d75f36-c514-11ee-bbc9-9b5ca9b20779_story.html), expand detention capacity for captured migrants and would require that the Biden administration shut down the border if too many migrants cross illegally.

Better yet, it made none of the concessions to Democrats that Republicans appeared willing to make in previous border deals - such as the [*immigration plan proposed by former President George W. Bush*](https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/stateoftheunion/2007/initiatives/immigration.html).

But now, in a stunning turn of events, Republicans have ditched the border deal after Trump sent signals to kill it, and Speaker Mike Johnson's GOP House Caucus followed that directive. Meanwhile, many analysts agree that scuttling the bill was merely a political ploy to [*keep the immigration issue alive into the November election*](https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-lays-blame-rival-trump-sinking-bipartisan-immigration-bill-2024-02-06/), allowing Trump to blame Biden for whatever happens at the border.

After members of his own caucus retracted their earlier support for the measure, [*prompting him to withdraw his as well,*](https://www.politico.com/live-updates/2024/02/06/congress/border-senate-mcconnell-schumer-ukraine-aid-00139925) McConnell was left appearing weak and politically vulnerable. The Kentucky senator, whose top priority has always been partisan power at all costs, now works with a cohort that at some level is fine being in the minority, so long as they can take down their political opponents and bring government to a standstill.

But it's not just Republicans in the Senate that McConnell has to be worried about. Another concern should be what is happening in the fractious House of Representatives, where a growing radicalization is taking place among a sizable number of Republicans.

Since the late 1970s, when Georgia Congressman Newt Gingrich came to Washington and persuaded his more senior colleagues to abandon concerns about governance, civility and reaching across the aisle, the GOP has become increasingly extreme, pushing the boundaries on what was permissible to do or say in pursuit of partisan power.

Years later, when the early Tea Party members began serving in Congress in 2011, they raised the temperature in the chamber and further toughened the rhetoric, making Gingrich and his cohort look tame by comparison.

The current crop of House GOP lawmakers is at least as combative and McConnell hasn't figured out a way to bring them under control. Certainly his counterpart, in the lower chamber, Speaker Johnson, has been anything but a help in that department. For the House Republican Caucus, McConnell's minor nod toward traditional practice is simply too much.

The House GOP has shown that it believes it is better to keep a political issue alive than hand President Biden a potential victory, even if they end up forfeiting almost everything they wanted at the border. Even when political analysts point out that their actions could hand political ammunition to Democrats, they don't budge. There's now a growing list - John Boehner, Paul Ryan and Kevin McCarthy so far - of Republican leaders in Congress who have all borne the brunt of the Republican shift toward obstruction and nihilism and who were all eventually pushed out of power.

To be sure, if McConnell finds himself on an island, he has nobody to blame but himself. He has been the quiet partner to the Gingrich and Tea Party generation who removed the guard rails from partisan warfare - and who proved willing to weaponize every procedure, including [*the confirmation of a Supreme Court Justice*](https://www.cnn.com/2020/09/18/politics/merrick-garland-senate-republicans-timeline/index.html).

McConnell finds himself branded as too traditional to his congressional colleagues who are indifferent to the imperatives of governance. Now an expanding segment of the Senate caucus too seems to want the kind of Republican leader who will carry out orders from Trump. They want a leader who reflects the no-holds-barred ethos that Gingrich embodied and who may be more combative even than the Tea Party.

Revolutions frequently swallow their own. McConnell stands on the precipice of meeting the same fate as his predecessors in the House. While members of the GOP wrestle with their internal struggles, President Biden will certainly remind voters whenever he can about the "Do-Nothing" Republicans on Capitol Hill.

Democrats, meanwhile, also face a huge challenge: They are dealing with an opposition party that keeps diving deeper into the dysfunctional muck. The result is that some of our nation's biggest policy challenges will remain unresolved, national and international crises unaddressed and the GOP will just keep drifting further and further to the right. If Trump is reelected in November, the convergence of his second-term priorities and the new Trumpian caucus in Congress could render governance virtually impossible.

McConnell's difficulties should be a reminder to those in power that eventually the newest members of the caucus will come after them, especially when leaders once considered warriors are deemed too timid to be effective.

Opinion by Julian Zelizer

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