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A Washington humiliation leaves Trump more politically exposed on Epstein than ever before

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President Donald Trump speaks during a bilateral meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin ...



To paraphrase a perennial Washington question: What is the president going to release and when is he going to release it?

Donald Trump is reeling from a spectacular defeat, easily his worst from his own party on Capitol Hill during two turbulent presidencies, after every step he took to stall and deflect **the Jeffrey Epstein saga** blew up in his face.

No one would have believed as recently as this past weekend that a bill requiring the Justice Department to release files related to the convicted sex offender would **race through the GOP Congress** with only **one vote against it** by Tuesday evening.

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But such can be the power of suddenly unleashed political justice.

Now, Trump and his Attorney General Pam Bondi, who both triggered the political uproar by pledging to open the Epstein files, only to then refuse to do so, are back where they started. Only in a much more vulnerable political position.

And they have unappetizing political choices at a moment when Trump's presidency appears damaged, **his popularity is falling** and a crush of other intractable issues bogs down his White House. Speculation is growing about whether a president who many were recently warning was a dictator is close to becoming a lame duck.

Vindication for victims

The overwhelming House and Senate moves to release the Epstein files are a stunning triumph for Epstein's victims after they became more visible earlier this summer. A president who believes he enjoys unfettered power and who disdains democracy was defeated by grassroots political campaigning in combination with a handful of courageous lawmakers from both parties.

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But Haley Robson, a survivor of Epstein's abuse, **told CNN's Erin Burnett** that Tuesday's moves were not the end for women who long ago lost trust the government would protect them. "We have to be very honest with ourselves. ... We do have a long road in front of us," she said.

But the pressure of the survivors' campaign now threatens to bear down on Trump alone, after the House and the Senate moved with extraordinary speed to dump a radioactive political issue on the White House. Their pace might at least momentarily weigh on the mind of a president who was twice saved from conviction in an impeachment trial by pliant Republican senators.



Attendees take part in a vigil hosted for survivors of convicted sex abuser Jeffrey Epstein by the Democratic Women's Caucus in Washington, DC, on November 18, 2025. (*Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images*)

In one of the most startling developments, House Speaker Mike Johnson, who'd long opposed the bill before Trump's reversal, insisted the Senate must make changes to the bill. But senators ignored him and passed it up to the White House in an instant.

Unless Trump and Bondi release the Epstein files immediately, the question that's been haunting Trump for months will now become even more acute: What is he hiding?

A bid by the DOJ to play for time — perhaps by arguing documents cannot be released because of ongoing investigations — might obstruct the hopes of survivors. But it might also mean Trump never escapes a storm that, judging by his eruptions at reporters, is driving him to distraction. Another DOJ strategy could be to release countless pages of Epstein files but with details, names and other information blacked out to avoid incriminating people. But that would only prolong the controversy.

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There's been no evidence of criminal wrongdoing by Trump in relation to his former friendship with Epstein, who killed himself in prison in 2019. Trump again branded the drama a Democratic "hoax" on Tuesday. But multiple mentions of the president in emails sent by Epstein recently released by Congress raise the possibility that he's also referenced in documents held by the DOJ.

One option for Bondi could be a vast document dump that casts suspicion on multiple prominent men who victims say maintained ties to Epstein in the hope that any minor mentions of Trump might be swept away in a deluge of scandal. But as president, he's under the harshest spotlight and would be sure to attract the most interest, even though he has said he always knew Epstein was a creep.

Of course, Trump has turned his DOJ into an arm of his political movement. So it would not be a surprise to see partial disclosures that do not satisfy his critics. But such is the intrigue around the drama, that there is no guarantee people would believe that he'd released everything. And conspiracists who've obsessed about the Epstein issue will never be satisfied.



National Director of World Without Exploitation Lauren Hersh embraces Epstein survivor Danielle Bensky as they react to the Senate's passing of the bill to force the release of files related to Epstein in Washington DC, on November 18, 2025. (*Annabelle Gordon/Reuters*)

“The next question is, will Trump use some other maneuvers in an effort to deny the information to the public that’s required by the statute?” Vermont

Democratic Sen. Peter Welch said Tuesday. “We’ll see, but I don’t trust Trump on that.”

Kentucky Republican Rep. Thomas Massie, who broke with Trump to force through the bill demanding the release of the Epstein files, warned after the vote that he would act if there was an attempt to thwart disclosure of the Epstein evidence. As a last resort, he said, he might read aloud the names of alleged associates of the accused sex trafficker in the House. But he added that was only “if we hit all of the walls — but so far, we’re making it through the walls and over the walls, and we’re getting this done.”

What wider damage has Trump sustained?

Beyond the difficulty of next steps for Trump, there are the questions of how much political damage he’s suffered in recent days, both within his own party and personal power base and in the country more broadly.

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Ever since returning to the White House, Trump has wielded massive power through dominance, or at least the perception that he’s all-powerful. He never followed his party; it followed him. But the myth of total power was shattered on Sunday night when he reversed his adamant position that the House should block the attempt to release the Epstein files.



President Donald Trump awaits the arrival of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia to the White House on November 18, 2025. (*Win McNamee/Getty Images*)

The flip-flop was an attempt to defuse a looming political loss. But if his myth of omnipotence frays, it's likely only to encourage further challenges to his authority. Of course, Trump's instinct might be to lash out with constitutionally questionable conduct.

This is an unusual moment for Trump. Could it presage a new phase of his presidency where the GOP does not move in lockstep on his orders? Or is the Epstein issue — which, at least to begin with, was disproportionately important to the conservative base — a one-off?

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One test might come soon for Trump over whether GOP lawmakers revolt over another matter: the expiration of enhanced Obamacare subsidies, which triggered the government shutdown. Some GOP lawmakers want to compromise with Democrats on the issue, but **the president reiterated** on Tuesday that he opposed any solution that sends more money to insurance firms.

The US political calendar is relentless. And following larger-than-expected victories by Democrats in governor's races in Virginia and New Jersey this month, Republicans are wary about midterm elections next year. And onetime Trump ally **Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene's** recent attacks on Trump's globetrotting and lack of empathy over high prices suggest that frustration with him **cuts deeper than Epstein alone.**



Yet Trump is a survivor, and not just of two assassination attempts. He pulled off the greatest political comeback in history in 2024 despite a criminal conviction and after leaving power in disgrace in 2021 after refusing to accept the results of an election. No modern president has ever had such an unshakable connection with his base.

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Still, Trump's most potent political strategy has been to claim he's been persecuted. That's not an approach that seems likely to work as he's faced with victims of Epstein offering their testimony in public.

Trump's rough patch

Stunning developments on the Epstein files are not happening in isolation. It's been a terrible few weeks for Trump. His polling numbers have slumped, especially over his handling of the economy. In another potential blow to his aura of invincibility, a federal judge this week **raised grave questions** about the viability of the DOJ's prosecution of one of his enemies, former FBI Director James Comey.

The Supreme Court recently **seemed skeptical** about Trump's tariff policy ahead of a seismic pending ruling on presidential authority. And a federal court on Tuesday **blocked Texas** from using new congressional maps drawn at the president's behest to aid the GOP's bid to hold on to its House majority in next year's elections. (Texas plans to appeal to the US Supreme Court.)

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This leaves Trump needing a political rebound — a tough ask for a White House organized on the principle of the president's infallibility and for a commander in chief who will be 80 on his next birthday.

It's possible Trump no longer controls his own political fate. Presidents often get overtaken by events in second terms — most recently George W. Bush, whose political capital was consumed by the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina.

And the symbolic might of Epstein's long-overlooked victims has the look of a political force with unstoppable momentum.

Epstein's death deprived many of his victims of justice.

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But on Tuesday, Jess Michaels, an Epstein survivor, spoke about watching House members add their votes to a 427-1 victory that she told CNN's Jake Tapper represented a commitment not to "stay silent about powerful predators."

There's no evidence of criminal conduct by Trump. But his handling of the Epstein crisis now threatens to consume his presidency.



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