

McCarthy Sends Republicans Home After Losing 'Shock' Vote in House

With government shutdown nearing, House speaker faces a number of challenges in passing legislation

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WASHINGTON—House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) threw in the towel on further votes this week, sending lawmakers home after Republican holdouts derailed his latest effort to advance legislation funding the federal government.

Talks continued late Thursday, but the setback further dimmed hopes that Congress could pass measures to avoid a partial government shutdown at the end of the month, and it underscored how McCarthy's hold on the conference has only grown weaker since he won the gavel in January after 15 grueling rounds of voting.

McCarthy watched from the chamber floor Thursday as [rebel Republicans again blocked](#) a vote to advance one of the 11 spending bills that have yet to clear the House. The defeat resembled [a similar blockade in June](#), when dissidents brought the floor to a halt to protest what they called failed promises by McCarthy.

The collapse of a procedural motion to advance the \$826 billion defense appropriations bill came days after another failed vote on the same bill.

McCarthy told reporters that his plan was the same as the one that got him elected speaker in January. "Just keep working. Never give up," McCarthy told reporters as he left the floor.

Soon after, Republican leaders cut loose members for the weekend, saying no additional votes were planned for Thursday or Friday and that lawmakers would be given ample notice if they were called back to work. Some had already left the Capitol, for golf fundraisers and other events back in their districts.

"It looks like a coaching error," said Rep. Ryan Zinke (R., Mont.) of the failed vote. "Wow. I think we're all in this shock."

The 212-216 vote on the rule to open debate on the defense bill showed the depths of the challenges in avoiding a government shutdown, because military spending is generally popular among Republicans. If McCarthy can't get his party, with its narrow majority, to support a measure typically embraced by the GOP, Republicans will have an even harder time advancing a broader bill that funds government departments less favored by the party.

Efforts to pass a short-term continuing resolution, known as a CR, to fund the government past Oct. 1 to allow for more time for the House and Senate to pass the 12 overall appropriations bills have also stalled.

Behind closed doors, rank-and-file lawmakers met in the offices of House Majority Whip Tom Emmer (R., Minn.) to chart a path forward. Under an emerging strategy, leaders would arrange for a single rule vote to bring up multiple individual spending bills, including the defense bill but also others such as one funding the Homeland Security Department, one funding the State Department and foreign operations, and possibly others, according to Rep. Matt Gaetz (R., Fla.), an outspoken McCarthy critic.

Gaetz said he and many other GOP lawmakers would oppose any short-term bill, and instead wanted to press ahead immediately to pass the remaining 11 of 12 appropriations bills one by one. Given the lack of time, such an approach would push the government into a shutdown.

“I’d rather work through those contentious items through the appropriations process than just try to figure out what’s the next ornament to hang on a continuing resolution,” he said.

Rep. Mike Lawler (R., N.Y.), who represents a competitive district, said that he wanted a vote on a stopgap spending measure. But, as a backup, he said that he would work with Democrats to circumvent McCarthy and put an alternative on the floor if needed to minimize the length of a shutdown.

“If there is not going to be a CR coming out of the House Republican caucus then I will move forward with the discharge petition,” Lawler said, referring to a procedural step to bypass the speaker. Such a petition would need signatures from a majority of lawmakers to force a vote.

Meanwhile, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) moved forward Thursday with a Federal Aviation Administration reauthorization bill that could be used as a legislative vehicle for a stopgap spending patch to try to avert a shutdown.

House Democrats, who oppose the deep spending cuts pushed by conservatives, are helping to keep the pressure on McCarthy. At one point, with a display board inside the chamber showing a tie vote, Democrats rushed in Rep. Sanford Bishop (D., Ga.) to cast a “no” vote, tipping the scales against Republicans.

They said the latest GOP setbacks showed Republicans weren’t up to running the chamber.

“It’s certainly a referendum on whether they can govern,” said Rep. Pramila Jayapal (D., Wash.). “We’ve been saying from the beginning that they can’t govern and they can’t govern.”

A day earlier, McCarthy had predicted that Republicans would pass the rule needed to advance the defense appropriations bill, noting that he had persuaded Reps. Ralph Norman (R., S.C.) and Ken Buck (R., Colo.) to switch their votes to “yes.” But then two new Republicans — Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R., Ga.) and Eli Crane (R., Ariz.)—flipped their votes from “yes” to “no,” leaving McCarthy no further ahead than when he had started.

“I think they thought they had the votes,” said Rep. [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D., Calif.), the former House speaker. Asked if any rule votes had failed when she was speaker, she said “never. Not one,” and laughed.

Until dissident Republicans joined with Democrats in defeating a rule in June, no rule vote had been blocked since 2002. Typically, rule votes are a formality passed along party lines, but GOP insurgents have embraced them this Congress as leverage to control the floor.

“We are very dysfunctional right now,” said Rep. Tim Burchett (R., Tenn.). “Speaker Pelosi, love her or hate her, she put something out there, and they’d rally around it...that’s what leaders do.”

McCarthy faces a series of challenges in winning over votes and keeping the government funded.

Lack of trust

The root of the problem, as described by GOP lawmakers, stems from a lack of trust that McCarthy would deliver on promises to further trim spending. McCarthy has cleared through the House one bill—funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs and military construction—that is protected from cuts; the defense-spending bill is as well. But he hasn’t scheduled floor votes on any of the bills that would face reductions. That has raised doubts among some spending hawks that he will follow through.

“You’re doing the things you want to do first and reserving for later the things you don’t like to do,” said Rep. Steve Womack (R., Ark.), describing the conservative criticism. “I think what some of the holdouts would like to have are some bills that were actually cutting, so that they could see that we’re actually doing it.”

In a closed-door meeting Wednesday night, McCarthy and GOP leaders sketched out a path to fund the government beyond Sept. 30 that some members said was too vague. While it specified total fiscal 2024 discretionary spending of \$1.526 trillion without tapping into funds from already-appropriated projects, it didn't specify which programs would be cut.

Rep. Keith Self (R., Texas) is a dissident who is close to the House Freedom Caucus. "It's a matter of trust," said Self, who nonetheless voted to advance the defense bill. "I'm still processing the way ahead."

Disagreements on substance

The sticking points over substance include:

- Dissidents say there is no timeline for passing individual spending bills at the revised level they back.
- No clear establishment of a commission to examine how to reduce deficits and debt.
- Enough dissidents also oppose aid to Ukraine, and want any assistance stripped out of legislation before they will support it. This position puts them at odds with other GOP lawmakers.

"Everything that was discussed yesterday was kind of in abstract," said Rep. Andy Ogles (R., Tenn.), who voted to approve the defense appropriations bill but is now a "no" vote on the House Republicans' stopgap-spending measure. "It was a whiteboarding exercise, if you will. So nothing's concrete."

Challenges of working with Democrats

The bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus released a framework late Wednesday that would temporarily extend government funding through mid-January 2024, while advancing some GOP border priorities and provide money for Ukraine and disaster relief.

But any move by McCarthy toward embracing a plan that could win Democratic votes would likely fracture his own party and could cost him his job. Already, some dissident Republicans are threatening to hold a vote to oust him as speaker.