

# Congress averts government shutdown with last-minute scramble

*Lawmakers avoid closing the government, but Ukraine funding — and McCarthy's speakership — face further hurdles*

**By Tyler Pager**

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A last-ditch effort on Capitol Hill Saturday staved off a government shutdown with less than three hours to spare, as House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), in an abrupt strategic reversal, offered a plan that won the support of nearly all House Democrats and most Republicans to keep the government open through mid-November.

The legislation, which the Senate then passed with broad bipartisan support, marked a stunning reversal after many in Washington expected the government to close at midnight following several failed attempts by House Republicans to agree on spending legislation over the past week.

Ultimately, House Democrats supported McCarthy's eleventh-hour proposal for a 45-day "continuing resolution" including disaster relief funds, an extension of a federal flood insurance program and reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration. All but one Democrat voted to support the legislation while 90 Republicans voted against it, resulting in a vote of 335-91.

The Senate passed the bill 88-9, with all nine "no" votes coming from the GOP.

It was a major victory for Democrats, who had uniformly opposed previous attempts by Republicans this week to pass measures that would have dramatically cut spending. It came only after McCarthy tried repeatedly to craft legislation that would attract enough House Republicans by slashing spending, falling short despite giving in to many of the demands of his most hard-line conservative members.

"We're on the path to avoiding an extreme MAGA Republican shutdown," House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-N.Y.) said after the House passed

the short-term extension. “It was a victory for the American people and a complete and total surrender by right-wing extremists who throughout the year have tried to hijack the Congress.”

However, the resolution does not include any funding for Ukraine in its war against Russia, a major priority for Democrats, sparking immediate calls for separate legislation to provide money to Kyiv. The legislation was briefly held up in the Senate by Sen. Michael F. Bennet (D-Colo.), who wanted assurances there would be a prompt vote on a supplemental aid package for Ukraine.

A White House official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations, said Democrats expect McCarthy to bring a stand-alone bill for Ukraine aid to the House floor. The official declined to provide additional details, but pointed to McCarthy’s numerous public statements expressing support for Ukraine.

“Majorities in both parties support Ukraine aid, and doing more is vital,” Senate Majority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said after the votes.

McCarthy’s gambit temporarily staved off a government shutdown, but it also appeared to endanger his tenure as speaker. Far-right Republicans have been plotting for days to oust McCarthy from his leadership post, and they were furious Saturday when he chose to rely on Democratic votes to keep the government open.

“Every single Democrat in the House, except for one, voted for Kevin McCarthy’s ploy to continue Nancy Pelosi’s budget and Joe Biden’s policies,” Rep. Matthew M. Rosendale (R-Mont.) wrote on X, formerly known as Twitter. “Are we sure Hakeem Jeffries is not the Speaker?”

In order to win the votes of hard line conservatives to become speaker in January, McCarthy agreed to lower, from five to one, the number of members required to force a vote on ousting him from the position. If McCarthy’s Republican adversaries decide to push forward on such an effort next week, the results would be highly unpredictable and could throw the House into further turmoil.

The spending measure headed for approval Saturday would fund the government through Nov. 17, meaning lawmakers will have to grapple with

another round of negotiations to avoid a shutdown just before the Thanksgiving holiday. Many lawmakers said they saw little reason to expect any of the major disputes to be resolved before then — including differences over spending levels, funding for Ukraine and border security provisions.

Rep. Don Beyer (D-Va.) said in a statement that the legislation is only a “short reprieve that ensures the threat of a shutdown will hang over Congress and the nation in the weeks ahead.”

Democrats pointed out that the two parties negotiated a spending agreement in the spring as part of a deal that averted a government default, and that McCarthy had been trying to push through spending levels that fell far below that bipartisan agreement.

President Biden called the measure’s passage “good news for the American people.” But, he added, “I want to be clear: we should never have been in this position in the first place. Just a few months ago, Speaker McCarthy and I reached a budget agreement to avoid precisely this type of manufactured crisis.”

Saturday’s rapid-fire developments crystallized questions that have been hanging over the House since Republicans narrowly took control in January: Would McCarthy be able to work with a hard-right faction of dissidents, or would he ultimately have to reach out to Democrats to accomplish the basic task of governance? And if he worked with Democrats, would his speakership survive?

It now seems clear that McCarthy does, in fact, need votes from the other party on some key measures. As for his ability to keep his post, that may become evident within days.

Saturday’s stopgap resolution came after a day of chaos on Capitol Hill, beginning with McCarthy startling his colleagues by bringing the 45-day proposal to the floor without a guarantee it would pass. Until then, the speaker had only offered measures designed to appeal to the conservative rebels, but Saturday’s resolution, by extending current spending levels, was clearly aimed at winning broad bipartisan support.

As Democrats scrambled to delay a vote on the legislation to ensure they had time to read it, Rep. Jamaal Bowman (D-N.Y.) pulled a fire alarm in the Cannon House Office Building. The incident has prompted an investigation by the United States Capitol Police, and some Republicans are calling for him to be expelled from the House.

Bowman's chief of staff, Sarah Iddrissu, wrote on X that the congressman "did not realize he would trigger a building alarm as he was rushing to make an urgent vote." She added that he "regrets" causing confusion.

In the end, Democrats declared victory, relieved to have averted a shutdown and staved off drastic cuts to federal spending. Until midday Saturday, both sides were bracing for a widespread suspension of government services and strategizing on how to apply pressure to force their opponents to back down. Biden and other Democrats were convinced Republicans would pay a political price for any shutdown, and many GOP lawmakers privately agreed.

"Here's what went down: we just won a clean 45 day gov extension, stripped GOP's earlier 30% cuts to Social Security admin etc, staved off last minute anti-immigrant hijinks, and averted shutdown (for now)," Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) wrote on X.

Earlier proposals from House Republicans would have cut hundreds of billions of dollars from programs serving millions of Americans, including nutritional aid for pregnant mothers, housing subsidies for low-income families, funds for medical research and initiatives to protect the environment, among others.

McCarthy's weekend gambit came after Republicans failed to pass a short-term funding bill on Friday that would have cut most nondefense government programs by 30 percent. Despite that nod to conservative austerity, 21 far-right Republicans joined every Democrat in opposing the legislation for a variety of reasons. Some were opposed to any stopgap measures, demanding that Congress instead pass the 12 year-long spending bills necessary to fund the government through 2024.

That vote capped several weeks when the bitter, sometimes personal warfare among House Republicans rose increasingly to the surface. GOP moderates, and many conservatives, became livid at the small band of dissenters, such as

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.), who they argued were preventing conservative measures from passing, making their party look inept and exposing Republicans to considerable political peril.

Former president Donald Trump, who has a wide lead in polling for the Republican nomination to challenge Biden, had stirred the pot by encouraging House Republicans to shut down the government if they did not get a favorable deal. “The Republicans lost big on Debt Ceiling, got NOTHING, and now are worried that they will be blamed for the Budget Shutdown,” he wrote on Truth Social last weekend. “Wrong!!! Whoever is President will be blamed, in this case, Crooked (as Hell!) Joe Biden!”

On Saturday, after the stopgap resolution passed, McCarthy taunted the far-right rebels in his conference who have threatened to bring a motion to oust him, saying “bring it.” He added, “I welcome those 21 back in, and we would get a better and more conservative bill if they would vote with us.”

Government shutdowns can cost the American economy billions of dollars as a wide range of federal functions are suspended. Essential workers, such as members of the military and air traffic controllers, continue to work without pay, but hundreds of thousands of others are furloughed.

For weeks, the White House warned that a shutdown would devastate families across the country, especially those of federal employees who would miss paychecks. Officials also said long-term disaster recovery would be delayed and small businesses would lose out on millions of dollars in loans, among other vital government services that would be suspended.

White House officials especially went after McCarthy in recent days, arguing that he was reneging on the spending deal they had negotiated with him several months ago as part of the debt limit. “We shook hands on it. We agreed,” Biden said at a campaign fundraiser in San Francisco on Wednesday. “Well, only a couple months later, they’re changing the whole deal.”

At the same time, Biden took a largely hands-off approach to the congressional wrangling, as administration officials were adamant that Republicans deserved all the blame if the government shut down. “There are those in Congress who are sowing such division, they’re willing to shut down this government right now,” Biden said.

After the House passed the legislation Saturday afternoon, White House officials signaled that Biden was likely to sign it, calling it a “big victory” to keep the government open and avoid deep spending cuts.

But it is clear that Saturday’s developments only postponed some of the major political battles in Congress. Chief among those may be whether to keep providing aid to Ukraine as it mounts a slow-moving effort to expel Russian troops from its territory.

The lone Democrat to vote against the House bill was Rep. Mike Quigley (D-Ill.), co-chair of the Congressional Ukraine Caucus, who wrote on X that the legislation “is a victory for [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and his sympathizers. We now have 45 days to correct this mistake.”

Democrats and some Senate Republicans also expressed concern about the absence of Ukraine funding, as officials sought to reassure Kyiv that aid for their fight against Russia was still a priority.

“We cannot under any circumstances allow American support for Ukraine to be interrupted,” Biden said. “I fully expect the Speaker will keep his commitment to the people of Ukraine and secure passage of the support needed to help Ukraine at this critical moment.”