

# Matt Gaetz Launches Bid to Oust Kevin McCarthy as House Speaker

*Florida lawmaker and House speaker have fought over the Republican party's direction*

By Kristina Peterson  
Wall Street Journal

WASHINGTON—Rep. Matt Gaetz (R., Fla.) and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) have been on a collision course since the start of the year. Now, the two lawmakers will finally [square off in the Capitol](#) in a historic vote over the party's direction and leadership.

Gaetz, 41 years old and a fourth-term member of the House, took to the House floor late Monday to formally move ahead with a vote to oust McCarthy as speaker, known as [a motion to vacate](#). "Declaring the office of speaker of the House of Representatives to be vacant, resolved that the office of the speaker of the House of Representatives is hereby declared to be vacant," Gaetz said in brief remarks laying out his motion.

"Bring it on," McCarthy, 58, said on social media. "Just did," Gaetz responded.

The vote will test both Republican support for McCarthy in the GOP-controlled chamber, as well as what part Democrats and their leader Hakeem Jeffries (D., N.Y.) want to play in [saving his speakership or pushing him out](#).

The mutinous plan has surprised few in the Capitol, where Gaetz has long made clear his vehement opposition to McCarthy, who engineered a [short-term spending deal](#) that will keep the government funded through mid-November over hard-line conservatives' objections.

McCarthy has said he is ready for any vote, and painted Gaetz as an obstructionist with a personal vendetta against him. "Don't judge the GOP by Matt Gaetz. Judge us by the enemies we keep," he said on Fox News on Monday. "Look, that's fine if Matt dislikes me. That's OK."

Gaetz has said his opposition to McCarthy isn't personal.

"For some people, policy failures are recast as personal because their own failures are personally embarrassing to them," Gaetz told reporters Monday.

The effort to challenge McCarthy requires several steps. Filing a motion to vacate gives the member the power to call it up for a vote, which then obligates the speaker to schedule a vote within two legislative days. McCarthy and allies could then move to hold a vote to table the motion or take other steps to derail the move short of a new vote for speaker.

Gaetz is [one of a number of hard-line Republicans](#) who have regularly derailed legislation in pursuit of reining in federal spending and clawing back more power from House leadership. The number of Republicans expected to vote with Gaetz could roughly range from six additional dissidents to closer to the 20 holdouts who initially voted against McCarthy for speaker, according to a House GOP lawmaker. Gaetz said he would seek to force a vote on McCarthy repeatedly if his efforts don't initially succeed.

"It took Speaker McCarthy 15 votes to become the speaker, so until I get to 14 or 15 votes, I don't think I'm being any more dilatory than he was," he said.

Many prominent House Republicans, including Rep. Elise Stefanik (R., N.Y.), Tom Emmer (R., Minn.) and Rep. Patrick McHenry (R., N.C.), made statements backing McCarthy on Monday. "At least 200 Republicans will be voting to support the speaker, including me," said Rep. Larry Bucshon (R., Ind.) on social media.

But other longtime critics signaled they were likely to back removing McCarthy. "He cannot remain Speaker," said Rep. Andy Biggs (R., Ariz.) on social media.

With a thin majority of 221-212 in the House, even with broad GOP support McCarthy could be forced to seek help from Democrats to quash the uprising.

Asked about the motion, Jeffries said: "We continue to focus on putting people over politics, not inside parlor games." When asked if he would speak with McCarthy this week he said, "In all likelihood, yes."

The question facing Democrats now is "are we better off bailing out McCarthy [or] are we better off as a country by being able to just table this and sidestep it?" said Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D., Ore.).

Even if McCarthy survives this challenge, the moment has vaulted Gaetz further into the national spotlight. Some GOP lawmakers say that Gaetz's challenge to McCarthy is about raising his profile, rather than changing policy. Leading a rebellion against McCarthy could burnish Gaetz's credentials in a 2026 Florida gubernatorial race, which many expect him to enter.

“He’s all about self-promotion,” said Sen. Markwayne Mullin (R., Okla.). “He’s found his moment of fame because he opposed McCarthy’s speakership. And he hasn’t let it go.”

Some lawmakers, including McCarthy, have suggested Gaetz’s attacks stem from his belief that the speaker has played a role in an Ethics Committee investigation into Gaetz’s conduct. McCarthy reiterated Sunday that he doesn’t get involved in ethics complaints.

That ethics probe began in 2021 under Democratic control in response to [allegations of sexual misconduct](#) and the sharing of inappropriate images or videos on the House floor, among others, according to the committee. Gaetz has called the allegations false smears. In February the Justice Department [ended its investigation into Gaetz](#), without bringing charges, drawing to a close a yearslong probe centered on whether the lawmaker had inappropriate contact with a minor. He had denied wrongdoing.

Gaetz grew up the son of a powerful GOP lawmaker, Don Gaetz, the onetime president of the Florida state Senate. Nicknamed “Baby Gaetz,” the younger Gaetz worked as an attorney and later in the state House. He won a crowded primary for an open seat in a Republican district and was sworn into the U.S. House in January 2017.

In Washington, his increasingly antagonistic style of politics came with a makeover aimed at television. He donned slim-tailored suits, slicked his hair into swoops and learned how to contour his face with makeup.

In the House, Gaetz stood out as one of the most sharp-elbowed defenders of former President [Donald Trump](#). He threatened Michael Cohen, Trump’s longtime former lawyer turned critic, over social media in 2019, suggesting without evidence he had been unfaithful to his wife, before later apologizing. Gaetz proposed to his own wife, Ginger, at Mar-a-Lago, Trump’s Florida resort. Gaetz said Monday he had recently spoken to Trump, but declined to provide any details.

But before he embraced Trump, he had endorsed former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush in 2015, calling him an [“outstanding conservative governor”](#) on social media.

“When Jeb Bush was the leader of the party and the politics were Bushism, he flocked to that power center,” said former Florida GOP Rep. David Jolly. “But as the power center evolved, he continued to chase the power center—that included Trump and conservative media.”

Before Gaetz started taking aim at McCarthy, he traveled to former GOP Rep. Liz Cheney’s home state of Wyoming to criticize her after she voted to impeach

Trump. [Cheney was kicked out of GOP leadership](#) over her continued criticism of Trump and lost her primary in 2022.

Gaetz worked to block McCarthy from becoming speaker in January through more than a dozen ballots. After a tense standoff with McCarthy and his allies—one lawmaker, Rep. Mike Rogers (R., Ala.), [was physically restrained](#) when he angrily approached Gaetz—Gaetz finally relented and voted “present” rather than “no” in the 15th round.

As the government-funding deadline approached, tensions heightened between Gaetz and McCarthy. In a recent GOP meeting, Gaetz alleged that messages were [sent to conservative influencers](#) on behalf of McCarthy, offering to pay them to criticize Gaetz and the threat of a looming shutdown.

McCarthy fired back that he had nothing to do with the messages and that his outside lawyers had sent the group behind the messages a “cease and desist” letter, a copy of which was viewed by the Journal. The speaker told Gaetz he wouldn’t bother to spend money on him, according to someone familiar with the exchange.

The strain between McCarthy and Gaetz was so well-known that an [Instagram reel dubbing made-up dialogue about a tiger](#) over a clip of a heated exchange between the two during the speaker election became a running joke among House Republicans.

For McCarthy’s birthday later that month, Rep. John James (R., Mich.) presented him with a stuffed tiger.

*Alex Leary, Lindsay Wise and Katy Stech Ferek contributed to this article.*