

## Senate fills the void as House GOP burns from within

It's an unintended consequence for House conservatives: The Senate minority leader who many of them abhor is, for now, the most influential leader in the congressional GOP.

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With the House effectively shut down, the Senate has the upper hand on Washington's two biggest issues this fall — aiding Ukraine and Israel and keeping the government open.

Even if the House GOP selects a speaker or a caretaker leader to claw out of the current chaos, its Republicans will already be in a weakened state as the White House prepares a massive, potentially \$100 billion request for national security aid. Instead, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell's Senate GOP looks to have the Republican sway over both that foreign money debate and the fight to avoid a shutdown.

As his last act before getting ousted, Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) made the Senate swallow a spending bill without Ukraine aid that his conservative members opposed. But with a Nov. 17 shutdown deadline less than a month away and Ohio GOP Rep. Jim Jordan's speaker bid sputtering, the next confrontation over federal funding is looking very different.

That's in large part because McConnell, after enduring public scrutiny of his health all summer, is embracing a generous aid package for Ukraine and Israel and is in harmony with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer on the framework of that legislation. The Senate minority leader faces real internal opposition of his own, but at the moment his anti-shutdown, pro-Ukraine position at least gives Democratic leaders a Republican they can talk to.

It's a harsh unintended consequence for the House conservatives who ejected McCarthy: The Senate minority leader who many of them abhor is, for the moment, the most influential leader in the congressional GOP.

"He's the only Republican negotiator," Sen. Peter Welch (D-Vt.), a longtime House member, said of McConnell. Welch underscored what's become obvious the longer that House Republicans fail to pick a speaker: They "don't have a coherent point of view that has votes behind it."

Even some members of the fractious House GOP conference acknowledge the harsh reality they're facing. The longer they struggle without a speaker, the more anxious they get about having the Senate's fingerprints all over the next major spending fights.

The House's leadership vacuum means that "we cede our ability to do what we need to be doing to govern to the Senate, to the White House," said Rep. Steve Womack (R-Ark.), a longtime appropriator who refuses to support Jordan for speaker. "This House needs a little help, needs a little divine intervention right now."

Womack is among several Republicans who are now seriously debating a plan to give new powers to their acting speaker, Rep. Patrick McHenry (R-N.C.). That move, its backers say, would give the House at least some say in any spending talks this month as the speaker battle drags on. Yet more authority for McHenry remains a huge unknown, since it would likely require Democratic votes.

And there are zero guarantees that the House GOP could pass any kind of spending package without Democratic support, given its four-seat majority, even if McHenry was able to bring a bill to the floor. Senators don't exactly have other options.

The Senate also has its own problems: A stalled spending measure that they'd wanted to tackle with bipartisan buy-in, the indictment of Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) and an unprecedented backlog of military promotions. But the upper chamber looks positively well-oiled compared to the leaderless House.

Senate Republicans are well aware that being publicly at odds with House Republicans risks exacerbating gridlock and sparking ire on both sides of the Capitol.

Yet the alternative of doing nothing seems out of the question.

"I don't think that we can afford to sit and wait here," Senate Minority Whip John Thune (R-S.D.) said. "I appreciate that. And, you know, my view is that there's a lot of work that needs to be done, and the sooner the better."

House Republicans could assert themselves on another front in the Senate's dealmaking on appropriations — by conducting informal talks. Yet Rep. Hal Rogers (R-Ky.), a former appropriations chair who still wields power on the spending panel, said the all-consuming chaos is preventing the usual House-Senate backchanneling among top lawmakers.

"With this turmoil going on, it's hard to get time that's not already taken. So it's just been extremely difficult to get together," Rogers said.

One thing that's reassuring some House Republicans: The Senate hasn't started on one critical item on Congress' to-do list — the Israel aid package. The White House is expected to submit its formal request this week, which means the Senate could take it up as soon, piling new pressure on to the dysfunctional House.

For the moment, though, the Senate hasn't even managed to pass a nonbinding resolution supporting Israel.

McConnell and Schumer are approaching the House's rocky few weeks from different angles. Schumer declared on Wednesday that the next speaker will have to operate on a bipartisan basis, given the realities of a Democratic Senate and White House.

Until there is a speaker, though, Schumer said that the Senate "must act as a steady, bipartisan force" and said that he "will not wait for the House." It's not exactly a predicament that Democratic senators wanted.

"I don't want to be empowered this way," said Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.). "Obviously, it raises the stakes for us to be functional."

McConnell endorsed a national security spending bill for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and border security this week, which Schumer praised him for by name on Wednesday. But the GOP leader has pointedly refrained from poking the House, declaring that "I got my hands full in the Senate."

Indeed, McConnell will likely face plenty of his own internal opposition as he tries to chart a path forward. In particular, linking help for Ukraine with Israel funding is almost certain to split GOP senators.

"It makes no sense," said Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.), who ran against McConnell in last year's leadership race. "I oppose it."

Still, it's not difficult to see that Senate Republicans, despite not controlling their half of Congress, may have to step into the breach to formulate the Hill GOP's position. Senate Republicans estimate that a majority of their members are interested in funding Ukraine and Israel, meaning that they could put up a strong vote for national security legislation (likely with a border security component).

That was the plan in late September, as the Senate plodded forward with a government funding bill with \$6 billion in Ukraine aid — until McCarthy surprised Washington by calling up a funding bill without that money. A few days later, the former speaker was out of a job, giving senators an opening whether they like it or not.

"Other than nominations, we've done very little. And we need to address this issue of money for Israel in Ukraine and Taiwan and the border," Sen. John Kennedy (R-La.) said of the Senate agenda. "While the House is getting its business together, we need to go forward."