

# How Mike Johnson Could Lose the House Speaker Vote, Explained

*If no one quickly wins the gavel, certification of President-elect Trump's victory could be delayed*

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The new House of Representatives meets for the first time on Friday. But before lawmakers can do anything else, they must elect a speaker. It is no easy task, given Republicans' razor-thin margin and internal divisions. Even though President-elect [Donald Trump](#) has thrown his support behind incumbent Speaker Mike Johnson (R., La.), it is far from certain that Johnson will be able to secure the votes needed to keep the gavel.

The stakes are high. If House Republicans can't swiftly unite to install Johnson or another person as speaker, the ensuing chaos could prevent Congress from functioning and—if the drama drags on long enough—potentially threaten Trump's ascension to the presidency on Jan. 20. In that admittedly far-fetched scenario, a 91-year-old senator from Iowa would become president instead.

## **What happens on Jan. 3, and how does the speaker vote work?**

Under the Constitution, newly elected and returning House members gather in the Capitol. First they have to elect a speaker, which requires a majority of those who vote for a particular person—abstaining or voting “present” doesn't count in the calculations. The declared candidate for Republicans, who will hold a narrow majority in the new session, is incumbent Johnson. Democrats back Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D., N.Y.).

The vote is by roll call. The clerk of the House from the previous Congress, who presides, will call out, in alphabetical order, the names of members-elect, who will then state the name of their preferred candidates. If no one receives a majority of votes cast for a named candidate, more ballots will be held until someone wins a majority. When Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R., Calif.) ran for speaker in January 2023, he wasn't able to secure the gavel until the early hours of the morning on Jan. 7, after [four grueling days of voting and 15 ballots](#).

## **How could Johnson lose the speaker election?**

Johnson has [almost no margin for error](#). Republicans are expected to have a narrow 219-215 majority on Jan. 3, and Democrats will all be voting for Jeffries.

One Republican—Rep. Thomas Massie (R., Ky.)—has said he would oppose Johnson, and several others have said they are undecided. All it would take to cost Johnson the speakership is for one more House Republican to vote for a different person, assuming all Democrats oppose him. But it is unclear whether any other candidate could win a majority.

It took three weeks of failed votes for other candidates before House Republicans [elected Johnson](#) in the fall of 2023.

### **What happens if no speaker is quickly elected?**

Without a speaker, members can't be sworn in, and the House can't organize itself. A law dating back to the first Congress in 1789 requires the election of the speaker to precede any other business, including the swearing in of new members, the formation of committees and the passage of any legislation. The failure to elect a speaker could also delay the certification of Trump's Electoral College victory, which by law is scheduled for Jan. 6.

### **Who are the key players in the speaker vote on Jan. 3?**

**Trump:** Trump endorsed Johnson for speaker, boosting his prospects. But the president-elect's support isn't a guarantee that Johnson can lock up the needed votes. Johnson has been calling skeptical Republican lawmakers, trying to tamp down their concerns about his leadership.

**Massie:** Massie said he respects Trump but wasn't swayed by his endorsement of Johnson. As long as Massie is determined to vote for someone else for speaker, Johnson can afford to lose only one more vote. This math gives all other members of the Republican conference enormous leverage to make demands of Johnson in exchange for their votes.

**Rep. Andy Harris (R., Md.):** Harris, who chairs the conservative House Freedom Caucus, has said he is uncertain of how he will vote. Harris has concerns about government spending, and he wants Johnson to commit to structural changes, including an overhaul of the amendment process, and giving priority to internal GOP debate before bills are introduced on the floor. He told The Wall Street Journal that a "significant number" of House Freedom Caucus members are similarly unconvinced.

**Rep. Chip Roy (R., Texas):** Roy is a prominent member of the House Freedom Caucus, who, like Massie, endorsed Florida Gov. [Ron DeSantis](#) over Trump in the

2024 GOP presidential primary. Roy helped lead opposition against a stopgap spending bill that Johnson negotiated with Democrats in December. He also opposed a slimmed-down version of the bill that included a debt-ceiling increase Trump wanted. He hasn't said how he will vote for speaker.

**Rep. Victoria Spartz (R., Ind.):** Spartz has said she is undecided on whether to vote for Johnson. On Monday, she called for the next speaker to create temporary structures for the House to initiate government spending audits. Johnson said he recently spoke with her.

### **How could Trump's certification on Jan. 6 as president be affected by a delay?**

If no speaker is elected by Jan. 6, Congress likely won't be able to ratify Trump's election or the election of Vice President-elect [JD Vance](#). If there is still no speaker, no functioning House, and no certification by Inauguration Day on Jan. 20, then the new GOP-controlled Senate's president pro-tempore, 91-year-old Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), would become president, according to the presidential line of succession.

Johnson's allies are warning fellow Republicans to stay united in support of Johnson to avoid such an unprecedented, self-inflicted crisis.

*This explanatory article may be periodically updated.*