

The Big Read US politics & policy

The ungovernable Republicans: 'Their goal is chaos'



House Speaker Kevin McCarthy's defenestration is the latest example of America's conservative movement eating its own

Edward Luce in Washington YESTERDAY

A vacancy opened up on Tuesday for the world's most thankless job: Republican Speaker of the US House of Representatives.

Whoever takes the role of the presiding officer of America's lower house should brace for accusations of betrayal by fellow Republicans and schadenfreude from opposition Democrats.

Assuming they can stomach that, the new Speaker will start with as poor odds as the outgoing one, Kevin McCarthy, whose 269-day stint was the shortest since 1876 when the Speaker died of natural causes. McCarthy, by contrast, was brought down by fellow Republicans. His betrayal was to have struck a deal with Democrats to keep the US government open for a while longer. The vote for McCarthy's successor will take place on Wednesday.

Like France's Jacobins, America's conservative revolution keeps devouring its children. The exception is Donald Trump. While McCarthy was being defenestrated in Washington, Trump was in New York facing fraud charges in a civil suit that, if he is found guilty, will almost certainly result in a huge fine and a ban on doing business in his hometown.

Rather than curry favour with the court, Trump accused the judge of being a corrupt tool of the deep state. He has continued to rail against proceedings on social media, even after the judge slapped a gag order on him. This is in spite of the fact that Trump is also embroiled in four criminal cases around the country.





Kevin McCarthy leaves the House chamber after he was ejected from his role as Speaker. Whoever replaces him will struggle to satiate their fellow congressional Republicans © Mandel Ngan/AFP/Getty Images

While Trump was attacking America’s judiciary, his acolytes in Washington were making its legislature ungovernable. That covers two out of three branches of the US government; Trump is hoping to regain control of the remaining one next year.

The question is how much further this populist revolution has to run. Observers have been saying for years that the Republican “fever” is about to break, a forecast made about the Tea Party Republicans by then President Barack Obama in 2012. Obama’s hope proved forlorn. Three years later, Trump descended his tower’s golden escalator to begin his journey to the White House.

After innumerable near misses during his volatile presidency, some predicted the fever would break after the storming of the US Capitol on January 6 2021. That forecast, too, was premature.

The Republicans vying to be Speaker

Kevin Hern

Age: 61

Profile: The congressman from Oklahoma owned more than a dozen McDonald’s franchises and started several other small and

medium-sized businesses before being elected to Congress in 2018. Hern chairs the influential Republican Study Committee, a conservative faction of House members who have long pushed for

Those who now say that only Trump's imprisonment could return the Republican party to regular order might be guilty of equally wishful thinking. Trump's 2024 re-election strategy is built around being a victim of America's legal system. Barely a day passes when he does not accuse one judge or another, or the judiciary as a whole, of being partisan, corrupt or racist, in the case of attorney-general Letitia James of New York, who is black.

"Any other defendant would be in the slammer by now," says Norm Ornstein, a Washington-based scholar of American conservatism. "Whether Trump physically wants to be in jail, I don't know. But his whole campaign is about being the martyr of a corrupt legal system."

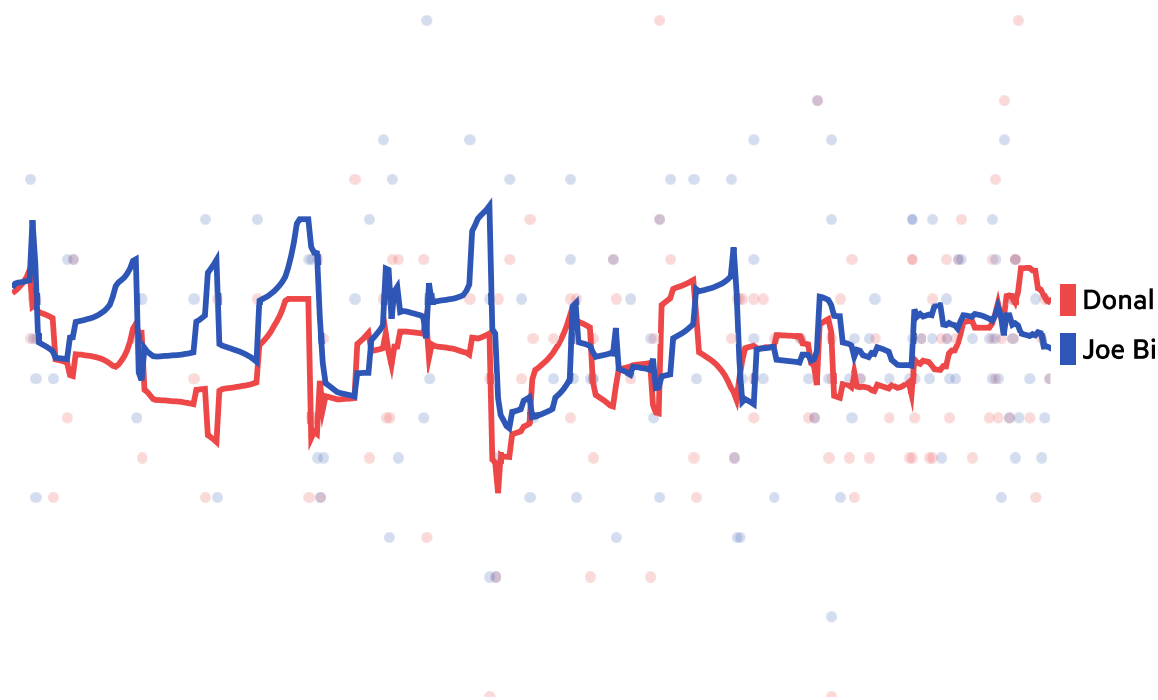
Kicking down the barn

The risk of political martyrdom that goes with leadership of the Republican caucus needs no emphasis. When Tea Party Republicans swept the 2010 midterm elections, they were led by the "Young Guns" trio of Eric Cantor, Paul Ryan and McCarthy. Cantor was ousted from Congress in 2014 in a primary challenge by a new breed of grassroots populist. Paul Ryan resigned the speakership in 2018 after arch-conservative rebels had made his job impossible. McCarthy fell to a similar fate on Tuesday.

Who would take on the job now? In another era, McCarthy's deputy, Patrick McHenry, would be the natural candidate to replace him. McHenry has declined to run. Few could blame him for walking away.

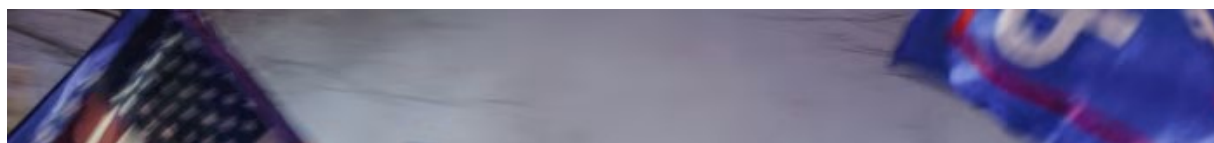
National polls suggest **Donald Trump** and **Joe Biden** are neck and neck

Voting intention (%)



Two Republicans have put their names forward, so far. One is Steve Scalise, a diehard Louisiana conservative who was badly wounded in a shooter incident six years ago and is now being treated for blood cancer. Such resilience might well qualify him for the job. The other is Jim Jordan, an ultraloyal Ohio Trumpian, who has for years been a thorn in the side of Republican leadership. Each of them is betting that they would succeed in imposing discipline where a swelling list of former Speakers have failed.

There is no assurance that either will win (although with Trump's endorsement Jordan has to be the favourite). In a quirk of congressional rules, the Speaker is elected by the whole House of Representatives even though the job is partisan. Since Republicans have a thin majority — 221 seats versus 212 for the Democrats — they can afford to lose only four of their own in the final vote. Democrats will almost certainly unanimously oppose whoever Republicans put forward as their candidate next Wednesday, as they did in last Tuesday's vote to oust McCarthy. It took eight Republican rebels plus the Democrats to bring McCarthy down.





Some predicted the 2021 Capitol riots would reverse the Republican party's embrace of populism, but traditional conservative ideals seem almost quaint compared with those of today's hardliners © Shay Horse/NurPhoto/Shutterstock

The problem facing Scalise and Jordan is that there is almost nothing they can offer to their most extreme colleagues that could buy more than their fleeting loyalty. McCarthy went through a gruelling 15 rounds of voting to secure the job in January. With each round, he added to a mountain of promises that he had little power to keep. He also agreed to a rule allowing just one Republican to trigger a simple majority vote on his speakership — the so-called motion to vacate. It was a desperate concession by a weak candidate that all but guaranteed his short tenure.

Why should the next Speaker's fate be any different? One answer is that both Scalise and Jordan have stronger conservative credentials than McCarthy. Jordan is a former head of the Freedom Caucus, the most rightwing group in the legislative party.

But a lot depends on what is meant by conservative. Even if the next Speaker is a former rebel with strong grassroots cachet, like Jordan, it is hard to know what policies would keep the troops in line. It is doubtful that any commitment would satisfy Matt Gaetz, the uber-disruptive Florida lawmaker who triggered last Tuesday's motion against McCarthy.

The rightwing Republicans on the rise

Lauren Boebert

Age: 36

Profile: Boebert was first elected to Congress by Colorado in 2020 and very narrowly won re-election last year. She gained notoriety for trying to bring weapons into the House, and for defending the January 6 2021 attack on the US Capitol as a “1776” moment, a glorious parallel to the Revolutionary war. She voted against the package that avoided a shutdown but also against removing McCarthy, arguing it was not the right time. She is backing Jim Jordan for the next Speaker.

FINANCIAL TIMES

The traditional conservative litmus tests of supporting tax cuts, lower public spending, tighter US-Mexico border controls and strong defence seem almost quaint compared with the demands of today’s hardline conservatives. Gaetz and his allies want to defund the FBI, impeach the US attorney-general, investigate the “Biden crime family” and end American support for Ukraine. There is nothing programmatic about their agenda. It shifts with the mood of the base.

“Their goal is chaos itself — to bring the system down,” says William Galston, a

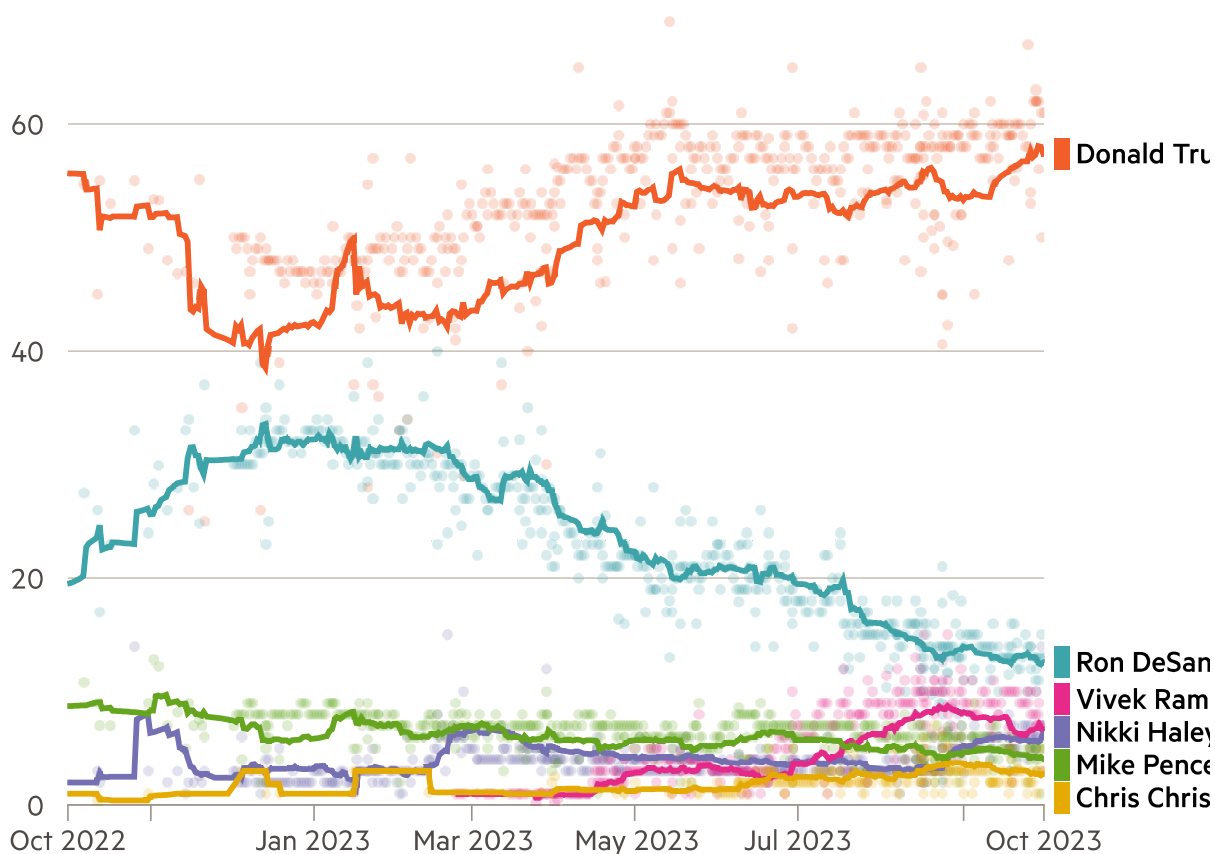
Brookings Institution senior fellow. “They are not reformists in any normal understanding of the word.”

Sam Rayburn, the Texas Democrat who in the 1940s and 1950s was one of America’s most celebrated Speakers, once said: “Any jackass can kick down a barn but it takes a carpenter to build one.”

In Rayburn’s day, however, the Speaker could discipline the jackasses. One such tool was the ability to deprive an unruly member of campaign funds. Nowadays, renegade lawmakers regularly outraise their leaders through acts of performative outrage. The average congressional incumbent raised \$2.8mn in the last round of House races. Viral artists such as Gaetz, Georgia’s Marjorie Taylor Greene, and Colorado’s Lauren Boebert can rake in as much as that in 48 hours. Gaetz was once asked whether he feared sacrificing his star power for notoriety. “What’s the difference?” he replied.

Donald Trump has pulled away from the field in polling for 2024 Republican presidential primaries

Voting intention* (%)



Source: FT calculations; data from FiveThirtyEight • Latest poll Oct 1

*National polls of registered voters or likely voters. Only highest-polling seven

It is hard to know what could convince the barnburners to change their ways. The MAGA base rewards them with money and the media lavishes them with airtime. In a recent Economist/YouGov poll, a majority of Republican voters said their representatives should stick to their position “no matter what” rather than compromise with Democrats. By contrast, Democratic voters chose compromise over principle by around two to one. As McCarthy found out, the very act of striking a deal with Democrats crosses the red line.

“It is tempting to say that whoever becomes Speaker is destined to fail,” says Ornstein. “When the enemy is the system itself, it is impossible to govern.”

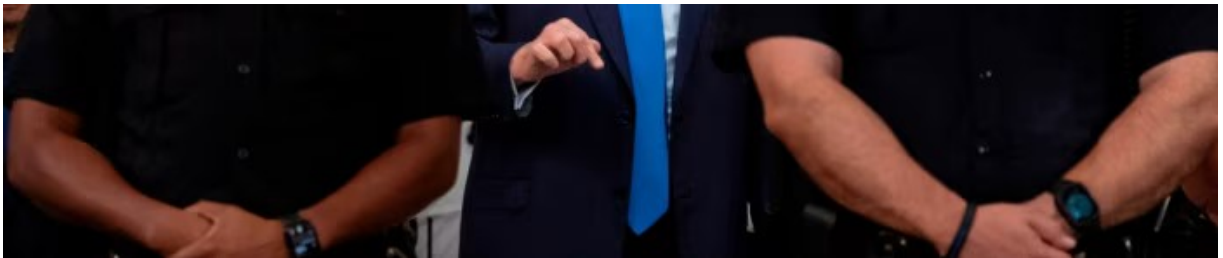
Trump’s party

Few this week were shedding tears over McCarthy’s ejection.

To cling on to his job, McCarthy had to pretend to be all things to all people. But chameleons are ill equipped to lead. A senior colleague of McCarthy’s once somewhat unkindly observed: “If McCarthy is alone, does he exist?” The same question might eventually be asked about his successor.

Whoever it is, the reckoning will come swiftly. McCarthy negotiated a 45-day funding extension to keep the US government open, which will expire in mid-November. The next Speaker will face the choice of crossing Republican extremists by making a deal to keep government open, or closing Washington and damaging Republican hopes of retaining the House at the next election. Either option risks political suicide.





Donald Trump speaks to reporters during a break from court proceedings in New York this week. Despite his legal woes, he is making it near impossible for others to lead the conservative movement © Craig Ruttle/AP

The ultimate apostle of chaos is Trump, who urged the House to default on US sovereign debt in May and is now egging on a government shutdown. Other than his mounting legal struggles, Trump's state of mind remains as capricious, and inimitable, as ever: at a rally this week he explained in detail why he would rather die by electrocution than be killed by a shark. While he is still around, Trump will continue to make it all but impossible for others to lead the conservative movement.

No one can rival his ability to hijack the news cycle. That leaves the party wide open to Trumpian mimics, such as Gaetz, who have acquired his knack of creating viral moments. It is a mistake to suppose they have a practical end goal in mind.

The next Republican Speaker will nevertheless have to run the gauntlet of negotiating with people like Gaetz, a spectacle that will do few favours to America's tarnished democratic reputation. A scholar in China's Global Times, an organ of its communist party, this week said that American politics resembled "a host of demons dancing in riotous revelry".

That offered a particularly lurid image of the likely Republican dramas yet to come. It might also be a fair description of how Trump prefers things to be.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2023. All rights reserved.
