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POLITICS

House Republicans Aren't Having Any Fun

They're blaming their leader, House Speaker Mike Johnson.

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ON A PARTICULARLY STRESSFUL DAY in a particularly stressful week during what has been, honestly, a particularly stressful year for House Republicans, the ever-sunny but perpetually beleaguered Mike Johnson insisted that he retained at least a modicum of power over the institution he ostensibly leads. “I have not lost control of the House,” the speaker declared to a gaggle of reporters trailing him through the Capitol.

Johnson’s own members, in the past month, have accused him of stretching if not wholly disregarding the truth, and his assertion last Wednesday that he has a firm grip on power was correct only in the most technical sense. On the day he uttered it, a group of Johnson’s most electorally vulnerable soldiers abandoned him to help Democrats force a vote on extending health-care subsidies, and a longtime lawmaker became the 25th House Republican—with many more expected to follow—to announce that he would not seek reelection next year. “This place is disgraceful,” GOP Representative Mike Lawler of New York vented on the House floor, calling out Congress’s failure to prevent a spike in health-insurance rates set to occur in January. In the preceding weeks, a member of the speaker’s leadership team—Representative Elise Stefanik of New York—publicly denounced Johnson as ineffective (shortly before she announced that she was, for now, quitting politics altogether), and another high-profile (albeit perpetually aggrieved) Republican, Representative Nancy Mace of South Carolina, pined, in the pages of *The New York Times*, for the sturdy hand of Nancy Pelosi.

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As Republicans approach the one-year mark of their trifecta under President Donald Trump, their party’s rank-and-file lawmakers are not a happy bunch. And like so many unhappy employees, they are directing much of the blame toward the boss: the speaker they elevated from obscurity a little more than two years ago.

“We need a course correction here,” Representative Kevin Kiley of California told us. A host of current and former GOP members of Congress we interviewed echoed his sentiment; they used more pungent terms when granted anonymity to speak candidly. These Republicans described a speaker who had, contrary to Johnson’s avowal otherwise, lost practical control of the House.

“I think he’s a good man, a good attorney, a good constitutionalist, and a bad politician,” one House Republican told us. Another said Johnson was well meaning, but to a fault: “In his obsession with not offending anyone, he offends everyone.”

The roots of Republican despair are both political and legislative, and they extend far beyond Johnson. Democrats will begin the new year favored to recapture the House in the midterm elections. (A Trump-led effort to fortify the GOP’s majority through aggressive gerrymandering has stalled.) With the majority in jeopardy, Republicans are bracing for a flood of additional members quitting their reelection campaigns after the holidays. A few, including Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene of Georgia, are leaving even before their terms are up.

Dim electoral prospects aside, many Republicans are also realizing that being a member of Congress in the Trump era is not all it’s cracked up to be. For that, they have themselves at least partly to blame. From the opening days of the president’s second term, congressional Republicans largely ceded their constitutional authority over spending to the executive branch. With a few mostly tepid exceptions, they made no effort to constrain DOGE while the Elon Musk–led department ransacked federal agencies established and funded by Congress. They approved provisions, slipped into House resolutions by Johnson, that restrict lawmakers from acting to cancel Trump’s tariffs. Even the House GOP’s biggest legislative victory—the summer passage of the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill Act—was a ratification less of their agenda than of the president’s. The speaker’s decision—criticized by some in his party—to keep the House out of session for the entirety of the six-week government shutdown this fall only added to the sense that the chamber was verging on irrelevance.

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It’s no wonder, then, that Republican frustrations seem to be intensifying. “They’re basically put in a position where they’ve got an honorary title as a member of Congress but no authority to do anything,” former Representative Reid Ribble, a Wisconsin Republican who retired in 2017, told us. “Until the actual way you govern changes, they’re going to feel this way.”

From the start, Johnson’s unwavering loyalty—some would say obsequiousness—to Trump has defined his speakership. He’s developed a reputation for never saying what he actually thinks about anything, lest he cross the president. Yet some Republicans are beginning to join Democrats in seeing that as a fault of Johnson’s rather than a

credit. “The reason he’s hanging on is because President Trump wants a weak speaker,” a House Republican told us. “He wants a speaker that essentially functions like a staff member, which is what Mike Johnson does.” Former Representative Bob Good of Virginia, an arch-conservative who left Congress in January, called Johnson “a puppet of the president” and said that Johnson remained speaker after Trump’s election only because of the president’s personal urging. “As has been sadly the case throughout the year, Republicans simply surrendered to his wishes,” Good said.

Johnson has also faced criticism from Republican women, who have accused him of not taking them seriously as policy makers. It did not go over well, one lawmaker told us, when Johnson remarked in a podcast interview that the Republican he would most trust to cook him Thanksgiving dinner was Representative Lisa McClain, the chair of the GOP conference—the rhetorical equivalent of a man giving his wife a vacuum cleaner for her birthday.

Among lawmakers’ many other complaints are that Johnson, perhaps even more than his predecessors, has tightly centralized power and deprived rank-and-file Republicans of the ability to secure votes on their legislative priorities, much less pass them. They say he also takes too long to make decisions and frequently punts the most difficult ones. “You can’t over-deliberate. Over-deliberation in this town is not good,” Representative Byron Donalds of Florida told us. Representative Chip Roy of Texas, who like Donalds is forgoing a reelection bid next year to run for statewide office, said that House leadership needed to be more aggressive about acting on conservative priorities, even if they stand little chance of clearing the Senate. “We’ve done some good stuff, but we need to be on offense and do more,” Roy told us. “You can’t just rest on your laurels and hope that you’re gonna win the election.”

Some of these gripes are time-honored grievances, the kind that House members make about their leadership no matter who is speaker or which party is in charge. After we asked Johnson’s office to comment for this story, calls started pouring in from members who wanted to vouch for him. “The speaker is doing a beautiful job in a really tough situation,” Representative Celeste Maloy, a second-term Republican from Utah, told us. She specifically defended Johnson’s treatment of women in the Republican conference and gently chided his critics. “I would rather see women supporting each other and supporting the causes we all believe in, and working towards long term goals,” she said, “instead of focusing on short-term disagreements.”

Representative Jodey Arrington, the chair of the House Budget Committee, cast Johnson’s deliberative and collaborative style—a source of complaints from some Republicans—as a “member-driven model” of leadership. “With that, there’s more discussion and debate. It’s always more efficient in leadership if you just tell them what to do,” Arrington told us. Johnson, he said, “is not your typical Washington leadership guy who works in power plays and side agreements. He is fully transparent.” (In a statement, a Johnson spokesperson did not address the criticism of

the speaker directly, instead boasting that under his leadership, the House GOP had “one of the most productive first years of any Republican Congress in history” and “stuck together to deliver the bulk of the America First agenda.”)

Johnson and his allies point out that the GOP majority is historically small, leaving him almost no room to maneuver and forcing him to achieve near-total party unity on any major vote. In shepherding Trump’s domestic-policy bill to passage, the speaker achieved a significant number of conservative wins—so many, in fact, that if they were split into different bills the House’s achievements for the year would look much more impressive. The speaker “is not getting enough credit for what House Republicans have been able to accomplish,” Representative Dusty Johnson of South Dakota told us. He turned to Jay-Z for inspiration: “I would say that Congress has 99 problems, but Mike Johnson is not one of them.”

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Yet dissatisfied Republicans have rebelled against Johnson in ways that Democrats rarely if ever did against Pelosi when she presided over a similarly slim majority during the first two years of Joe Biden’s presidency. GOP lawmakers have frequently stalled legislation by defecting on key procedural votes, and in recent months they have gone around Johnson by signing Democratic-dominated discharge petitions to force votes on legislation that the speaker has tried to block.

These tactics have, in turn, annoyed Republicans who believe that their restive colleagues are making an already challenging political environment even worse for the party. As the year draws to a close, they have taken to complaining about all the complainers. “We need more happy warriors,” Dusty Johnson said, arguing that Republicans have fallen into a culture of “victimhood” that he used to associate only with the American left.

Whether the speaker’s job is secure has become a topic of some debate inside the Capitol. The most obvious threat will come in the November elections, but could Republicans depose Johnson as they did his predecessor, Kevin McCarthy? Stefanik told *The Wall Street Journal* earlier this month that if a vote were called tomorrow, Johnson would not have enough support from Republicans to stay as speaker. Greene has also reportedly been talking with colleagues about an effort to oust Johnson, but she plans to leave the House next month. Asked if he was ready for new leadership, Donalds said, “Yeah, but I mean, look, it’s not coming up.” But then he added: “You never know in this town.” With Johnson’s support, Republicans changed House rules to make it harder to remove a speaker in the middle of a term. “Usually there are tremors before a speaker goes down,” one House Republican told us, “and this speaker has faced a number of tremors.”

Johnson's challenges won't get any easier when his unhappy Republican campers return to Washington in 2026. He'll probably have to watch as the House passes a bill to extend health-insurance subsidies over his objections, and Congress faces the prospect of another partial government shutdown at the end of January. Johnson might hold the speaker's gavel for another year, but the extent of his sway has never seemed more in doubt.

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