

NEWS ANALYSIS

The Far Right Gets Its Man of the House

The new speaker, Mike Johnson, is virtually unknown to most Americans, but he can be expected to press a hard-right social and fiscal agenda.



Speaker Mike Johnson shares the deeply conservative ideology of his mentor, Representative Jim Jordan, but lacks the confrontational profile. Credit...Kenny Holston/The New York Times

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In the end, Republican hard-liners got their man.

He wasn't the person whom the most extreme element of House Republicans really wanted — that was Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio, the godfather of the far right in the House who ultimately [was too toxic to ascend to the top post](#) and fell short.

But the new Speaker Mike Johnson of Louisiana, a man unknown to most Americans, is a second choice the far right can enthusiastically embrace. He shares the deeply conservative ideology of his mentor Mr. Jordan but lacks the confrontational profile or hard-edge style of the Ohioan. In fact, he has little profile at all.

Mr. Johnson, a second-tier member of the House leadership first elected in 2016, is the most obscure lawmaker to rise to the helm of the House since J. Dennis Hastert of Illinois was plucked from near the backbenches in 1998 to become speaker after Representative Tom DeLay, that period's version of Mr. Jordan, realized he could not succeed Newt Gingrich.

But Mr. Hastert, who later was disgraced in a sexual abuse scandal, had developed a reputation for spearheading health care legislation. If Mr. Johnson has a reputation at all, it is as a savvy and smooth constitutional lawyer who wrote a brief offering a legal justification for [trying to overturn the 2020 election](#) and served as a defender of President Donald J. Trump against impeachment.

Republicans see the fact that he is virtually unknown outside his Louisiana district as an advantage, giving him a chance to introduce himself to the public on his own terms.

But there should be no mistaking his extremely conservative views on social issues such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage, which Democrats can be expected to aggressively highlight in their efforts to tie more mainstream House Republicans to their new leader in their push to regain control of the chamber.

He is the first head of the arch-conservative Republican Study Committee to take the speaker's gavel, and though he is not a member of the far-right Freedom Caucus, he shares many of the group's positions. His strong standing on the right was underscored minutes after his nomination Tuesday night. Mr. Johnson was surrounded by some of the most extreme House Republicans, who shouted down questions about his effort to overturn the election and other policy issues, with one lawmaker, Representative Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, shouting at reporters to shut up.

Mr. Johnson is fundamentally more conservative than the ousted speaker, Kevin McCarthy, who despite his frequent partisan attacks realized [he needed to cut deals with Democrats](#) to keep the government solvent and operating. He twice this year passed critical legislation with Democratic votes — ultimately sparking the coup that led to his downfall.

Whether Mr. Johnson shares that same bipartisan imperative with a mid-November deadline looming for keeping the government open will become clear in the coming weeks. He will need to navigate his way out of a spending impasse that has split House Republicans before he even gets to negotiations with the White House and Senate leaders who now find themselves dealing with an unknown and untested new partner.

On the plus side for the new speaker, Mr. Johnson is certain to enjoy a honeymoon period with those on the right who had a deep distrust of Mr. McCarthy and feared he would work with Democrats, as he ultimately did. They are likely to grant him considerable leeway in figuring out the spending morass with just a few weeks remaining before the government runs out of money.

Mr. Johnson has proposed the idea of a lengthy stopgap spending bill to allow the House to take up its own funding measures, but they have been snarled by bitter Republican feuds, and it is uncertain whether the House can approve them.

Mr. Johnson was far from the first choice of his own colleagues. He was something of a desperation candidate as House Republicans entered a fourth week without a speaker, leaving the institution paralyzed and Republicans looking inept. Representative Tom Emmer of Minnesota, the No. 3 House Republican, defeated him Tuesday morning in an internal vote for the speaker nomination — an outcome that traditionally would have led to Mr. Emmer's being elected speaker on the House floor.

But the old rules are gone. Hard-right conservatives quickly went to work to deny Mr. Emmer any chance of obtaining the necessary votes on the floor and [forced him to withdraw](#) in just four hours. That opened the door to a second round of nominations. Again, Mr. Johnson did not initially win a majority but finally prevailed after multiple rounds of voting.

Some more mainstream Republicans had stood against Mr. Jordan because they believed his allies had been underhanded in their sabotage of Representative Steve Scalise of Louisiana, who [defeated Mr. Jordan in a vote for the speaker nomination](#). They vowed that Mr. Jordan would never be rewarded for such tactics. But with the party becoming a national laughingstock because of its inability to find a leader, no effort to deny Mr. Johnson surfaced, and Republicans rallied to Mr. Johnson's side, even though he had initially lost to Mr. Emmer.

The episode proved anew to hard-right Republicans that if they are willing to break party norms and ignore their own majority's position, they can still prevail — an outcome that Mr. Johnson might later find does not always work in his favor as speaker of the whole House.

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