

OPINION

THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Why Is the Public's Business at the Mercy of a Few Extremists?



Members of the 118th Congress being sworn in, in January. Credit...Mark Peterson for The New York Times

By [The Editorial Board](#), *The New York Times* Online, October 10, 2023.

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This article has been updated to include new information about Mr. McCarthy's decision not to run for speaker again.

The U.S. Capitol may be perched on a hill, but it is understandable why so many Americans [look down](#) on it.

One of the main reasons is that their Congress, which ought to be a global beacon of liberal values, continues to succumb to self-inflicted paralysis. How else can it be that fewer than a dozen lawmakers from the outer fringes of the Republican Party are holding one of the world's oldest democracies hostage to their wildest whims?

On Tuesday a small group of Republicans effectively shut down all business in the House when they voted to oust Kevin McCarthy as speaker. Though [210 of 218](#) House Republicans supported him, he lost his job when just eight voted against him, joining all Democrats who voted.

Without a speaker, the House can get nothing done. There will be no votes or even debate about paying for the government's operations, though the money runs out in six weeks. There will be no discussion of how to help Ukraine or how to deal with the nation's immigration crisis or any of the other crises facing Washington.

Even before he lost his job, Mr. McCarthy and his caucus lurched the nation from debt limit crisis to shutdown crisis to win debating points that might help them in the next elections rather than pass meaningful legislation that addresses the nation's challenges. We're now in the middle of yet another pointless fight, this time over the funding of the federal government and the leadership of the House.

Republicans in the House showed briefly, on [Saturday](#), that they were willing to do the right thing and compromise to avoid a shutdown. In the upcoming votes to choose a new speaker, they can and should do that again, by showing their commitment to responsible governance. If Democrats can help achieve that, they should. The next candidates for speaker could win Democratic votes by promising a different course, one that brings both parties together for the common good. Any other candidate for the job will also face the same choice.

Voters have given Republicans a majority of seats in the House and thus control over selecting the speaker, who sets the agenda in the House. Those voters, in turn, should expect the body to serve the people who elected them.

It's possible that the Republican Party is finally ready to again choose pragmatism over partisanship. Last weekend Mr. McCarthy sought and received the [support of hundreds](#) of Democrats to pass a continuing resolution to fund the federal government, a measure that pushed a potential government shutdown 45 days down the road.

It's hard to get excited about a victory in a fight that never needed to happen, especially at the last possible moment. But the saga reflects the reality of D.C. today: Bipartisan compromise has become the sole path to governing in the United States in 2023.

Democrats have the White House and a one-seat majority in the Senate, while Republicans control the House of Representatives and appointed a supermajority of conservatives on the Supreme Court. President Biden's executive authority extends only as far as the courts have allowed, while the only path through the Senate is with enough bipartisan support to skirt the shoals of a filibuster. The government, like the nation, is divided.

But political polarization is not the excuse for inaction that so many grandstanding politicians too often take it to be. With a divided Congress, the only way to get any legislation passed is with some support from the center of both parties. A Congress that operated in a more bipartisan manner could move the country beyond its impasses over issues like immigration or the sustainability of the social safety net. A more confident center-right party that doesn't genuflect to Donald Trump would have an easier time achieving those ambitious acts of self-governance.

While that's a tall order, it is not impossible: Just look at the past few days.

To keep the federal government open, Mr. McCarthy outmaneuvered the radicals in his own party, led by Representative Matt Gaetz. The next speaker needs to deprive Mr. Gaetz and his ilk of the weapon they've been using to force the House leadership [into compliance](#) with their demands. Congress represents more than 330 million Americans; Mr. Gaetz and his allies should not be given a heckler's veto over the business of government.

It was a conscious choice by the ousted House speaker to give them one. In the face of intransigence from his right flank, his successor should drop the anachronistic practice that demands Republicans bring up only legislation backed by a majority of their members. The so-called Hastert rule, named for Dennis Hastert, the disgraced former speaker, appears nowhere in the Constitution and can be used to prevent the House from moving forward with bipartisan legislation.

A new speaker should also commit to plain dealing with Democratic colleagues and may need them to prevent another putsch. Mr. McCarthy lost faith among Democrats by failing to keep his word and honor a deal over spending caps that he negotiated with the White House in May. The next speaker might consider that a good starting point for negotiations.

Once a speaker is chosen, the House will have less than 40 days to avert yet another standoff over a shutdown, and members of good will in both parties will again need to show that they are willing and able to compromise; the Democrats could permit more spending on border security, and Republicans should continue the vital flow of aid to Ukraine, among other issues.

The House Democratic leader, Hakeem Jeffries, [said Tuesday](#) that his caucus would "remain willing to find common ground on an enlightened path forward," one that did not leave the public's business at the mercy of a few extremists. Whichever leader Republicans choose should agree to a similar path.

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