

Why Republicans Can't Keep the Government Open

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As a shutdown looms, the House GOP is bickering over legislation that doesn't even matter.

By [Russell Berman](#)



Tom Williams / Getty

Yesterday was not a good day for House Republicans or for their struggling leader, Speaker Kevin McCarthy. In the morning, McCarthy was forced to scrap a procedural vote on a GOP proposal to avert a government shutdown that will commence at the end of this month if Congress doesn't act. In the afternoon, a handful of conservatives tanked McCarthy's bid to advance legislation funding the Pentagon.

The failure of the proposal to prevent a shutdown was the more ominous defeat, both for Republicans and for the country. Yet even if McCarthy manages to pass a version of this, it will almost certainly be an exercise in futility. For starters, it would fund the government for a mere 30 additional days. And its basic provisions—cutting spending by 8 percent for all but the Defense and Veterans Affairs Departments, restarting construction of the southern border wall, cutting off pathways for asylum seekers—will likely be stripped out by Senate Democrats.

Despite the GOP's evident dysfunction, Representative Kelly Armstrong of North Dakota was in a chipper mood when he called me from the Capitol. The McCarthy ally was scurrying between meetings in an effort to help resolve the latest crisis threatening the speaker. "We're a long way from landing the plane, but there are really productive conversations going on," Armstrong told me. If the plane represents, in Armstrong's metaphor, a functioning federal government, then House Republicans are still hovering at about 30,000 feet, with the runway coming rapidly into view.

Watch: The Republicans threatening to shut down the government

The Democrats who run the Senate aren't involved in the "productive conversations" Armstrong was referencing. If they were, McCarthy might already have lost his job. Before he can negotiate with the Democrats, the speaker must broker a peace among the warring factions of his own party, who cannot even agree on an opening offer. Groups representing the conservative Freedom Caucus and the more pragmatic Main Street Caucus announced a deal on Sunday to support the 30-day extension, with spending cuts and border restrictions attached. But almost immediately, hard-liners rejected the proposal as insufficiently austere. Led by Representative Matt Gaetz of Florida, several of these Republicans are threatening to oust McCarthy if he caves to Democrats on spending, and a few of them are openly itching for a government shutdown.

Any five Republicans can torpedo proposals that don't have Democratic support—as five GOP lawmakers did yesterday in blocking the defense bill—and any five could topple McCarthy by voting along with Democrats for a procedural tool known as a motion to vacate the chair. This has effectively made him a hostage of his caucus, with precious little room to maneuver.

Even the relatively optimistic Armstrong acknowledged the difficulty of McCarthy's position. "It's a pretty untenable argument to say you don't have enough Republican votes to pass anything and you can't negotiate with Democrats on anything," Armstrong told me.

McCarthy has tried many times to shake off threats to his speakership, alternately daring members like Gaetz to make a bid to oust him and pointing out that with such a narrow majority, any other Republican replacement would find themselves in the same unenviable position. I asked Armstrong whether McCarthy should simply ignore the hard-liners in his conference and strike a deal with Democrats to keep the government open, come what may. "I'm not sure he should yet," he said.

House Republicans have received hardly any backing from their brethren in the Senate, who have shown no appetite for a shutdown fight and have been more willing to uphold the budget deal that McCarthy struck with President Joe Biden in the spring. By bowing to conservative demands for deeper spending cuts, the speaker is reneging on the same agreement, which allowed Congress to raise the debt ceiling and avoid a catastrophic

default. “I’m not a fan of government shutdowns,” Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell told reporters yesterday. “I’ve seen a few of them over the years. They have never produced a policy change, and they’ve always been a loser for Republicans.”

For now, McCarthy allies such as Armstrong are adamant that this spending battle must result in a change in administration policy. They have zeroed in on the border, seeing an opportunity to force Biden’s hand and take advantage of an issue on which even some Democrats, such as New York City Mayor Eric Adams, have been critical of the president. “If we can’t use this fight to deal with the single most pressing national-security issue and humanitarian issue of our time, then shame on us,” Armstrong said.

Yet House Republicans have found themselves isolated, and bickering over legislation that—like most of their proposals this year—stands no chance of becoming law. A bipartisan majority in the Senate is likely to simply return a temporary spending bill to the House without the conservative priorities, perhaps with additional funding to aid Ukraine in its war with Russia. What then? I asked Armstrong. “I would shut it down,” he replied.

Democrats in the House, meanwhile, have watched the unfolding GOP drama with a mix of schadenfreude and growing horror. The Republican infighting could help Democrats win back a House majority next year. But a shutdown would not reflect well on either party, and voters could end up blaming Biden as well as the GOP for the fallout. Hundreds of thousands of federal workers would be furloughed, and millions of Americans might have to wait longer for Social Security checks and other needed benefits. “The rest of the world looks at us like we’re incompetent and dysfunctional,” Representative Gerry Connolly, a Democrat whose Northern Virginia district includes thousands of federal workers, told me. “How do you explain to our European allies that we can’t fund our government?”

Connolly is in his eighth term and, like America’s allies, has seen this brinkmanship play out several times before. He told me that whereas earlier in the month he thought Congress had a 50–50 chance of keeping the government open, he now puts the odds of a shutdown at 90 percent. “Sometimes you feel like we’re going to avert this cliff, and then there are times that you go, ‘No, we’re going off this cliff,’” Connolly said. “This one feels like we’re going off the cliff.”