



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on October 13, 2023

## Trump Largely Stays Out of Contentious House Leadership Contest

As the House of Representatives remains in a state of uncertain leadership, Donald Trump is taking a largely hands-off approach, keeping distance between himself and the heated fray playing out within the halls of Congress.

The latest shocking shakeup in the contest for House speaker was the news on Thursday evening that Representative Steve Scalise (R-La.), who had won the Republican caucus' support to lead the chamber, dropped out of the race after he found himself still unable to muster up enough votes to actually take the speaker's gavel.



AP Images

As a result, all eyes are on Representative Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), chair of the House Judiciary Committee, former Freedom Caucus chair, and a close Trump ally who has the 45th president's endorsement in the speaker contest.

That endorsement was not enough to give Jordan the edge over Scalise, but the Ohio lawmaker appears to have experienced a revival of his political fortunes after Scalise's withdrawal from the race. Nevertheless, despite a few comments here and there, Trump has not aggressively leveraged his enormous influence within the Republican Party to push lawmakers' decision-making one way or the other.

Observers note that Trump could have provided Scalise with the extra push he needed to whip up enough votes for a formal vote. Instead, he cast doubt on Scalise's ability to physically meet the demands of the job, telling Fox News' Brian Kilmeade, "but the problem, you know, Steve is a man that is in serious trouble from the standpoint of his cancer."

A [Politico](#) piece by the publication's editor-in-chief, John Harris, ruminated over what the contentious speakership race means for Congress and the country at large:

That is because, for now, Trump is the only leader with a durable following within the modern Republican Party. That's true even as the GOP is filled with people who quietly wish he would go away and a smaller number of would-be leaders who loudly advocate for that — so far to negligible effect. So far, no Republican has managed to emerge as a genuine leader in the Trump era — not by seeking alliance with him, nor by standing up to him, nor by trying keep a safe distance from him.

If Trump is a would-be authoritarian, the House drama shows that he is not the kind who cares much about exercising authority beyond himself. To the contrary, he seemed to regard the turmoil and ritual humiliations — first McCarthy, then Jordan, now Scalise — as a sideshow. In important respects, he is right.



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As a leftist, it's not surprising that Harris uses the "authoritarian" card against Trump. But he contradicts himself with his own words; if Trump were truly the authoritarian Harris accuses him of being, then the 45th president would be making much greater use of the bully pulpit he holds within the GOP to shape a congressional leadership favorable to him.

Harris does, however, bring up a relevant point with his characterization of the current House drama as a "sideshow." It's not that the speaker's race actually is a sideshow — on the contrary, the ramifications for the country are far-reaching.

And it's not that Trump sees it as one — Harris is no mind reader, and Trump's cool distance from the contest is likely due more to pragmatism than anything else.

What is significant is that Congress is undermining its own relevance by continually proving it is unable to effectively carry out its functions and enact the mandate given to it by voters. Kevin McCarthy promised the conservative base (and conservative hawks in his caucus) that his speakership would be a departure from the typical establishment politics.

But McCarthy's overtures to Democrats showed that the House, under his watch, would be no different than the disappointing speakerships of establishment Republicans such as John Boehner and Paul Ryan.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the pervasive inability of Congress to do what it has promised — even when Republicans have a majority — has fomented the electorate's disillusionment with the Legislature and is, unfortunately, leading even many on the Right to desire a strongman-type leader who will use executive action to accomplish what a seemingly irrelevant Congress cannot.

In other words, the fray in Congress is one factor fueling the [rising interest](#) (especially among young people) in authoritarianism.

On the other hand, the ousting of McCarthy and the failure of Scalise's bid are encouraging developments for the conservative movement, as it demonstrates the growing institutional power of the Right. Establishment Republicans are now realizing that conservatives are not merely giving empty threats, but will go to bat and refuse to play along if the party does not fulfill its promises.

It remains to be seen who will be standing when the dust settles. Representative Austin Scott (R-Ga.) has now jumped into the race, but Jordan is still the biggest name in the ring and even McCarthy has [said](#) "Jim's better prepared in the process to be speaker" than Scott.



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