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## The removal of the US Speaker

**Emma Kilheaney McSherry**

investigates the recent upset in the US House of Representatives

**O**n 4 October 2023, Kevin McCarthy became the first Speaker in the history of the United States to be removed as Speaker of the House of Representatives.

### How did this happen?

Two days earlier, House Republican Matt Gaetz (R-FL) introduced a motion to 'vacate the chair', which started a 48-hour process in which the House can remove the Speaker. McCarthy was ousted after the House voted 216–210 to remove him. Eight fellow House Republicans joined every House Democrat to remove McCarthy. His tenure as Speaker is the shortest since 1876, when the then Speaker died in post.

### Why did this happen?

McCarthy won the election to become House Speaker in January 2023 following 15 fractious rounds of

voting. In order to finally win the 216 votes he needed, McCarthy had to make compromises to the House Freedom Caucus. This included a rule change that would allow any individual to call a vote to vacate the chair and begin the process of removing the Speaker.

Days before his removal, McCarthy had agreed on a compromise with the Democrats to pass a short-term funding bill to avoid government shutdown. The eight Republicans who later voted for his removal were unhappy with this deal, and they wanted McCarthy to make more significant cuts to the budget. They also argued that McCarthy had broken deals made with the House Republicans over Congressional spending.

Gaetz, who led McCarthy's removal, is an outspoken supporter of Donald Trump. He is seeking to run for Governor of Florida in 2026 – this personal ambition contributed significantly to his actions.

In his 9 months as Speaker, despite only a narrow Republican majority, McCarthy remained unwilling to establish and build meaningful relationships with his Democratic counterparts, meaning that they had very little incentive to save him. The House

Democrats also argued that they could not trust McCarthy after he agreed to set up an impeachment inquiry into President Biden over allegations of corruption.

## What happened next?

On 25 October, Mike Johnson (R-LA) was elected as Speaker in a 220–209 vote. Johnson is the most junior representative elected as Speaker in recent years, having only been elected to the House in 2016. He will be tasked with passing a funding package to avoid government shutdown. Johnson only initially received support from 34 House Republicans. However, he secured more support after Trump urged Republicans to back him. Trump backed Johnson because Johnson supported Trump's attempts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election result.

## Why does this matter?

As already stated, McCarthy is the first Speaker in the history of the USA to be removed as Speaker of the House of Representatives. While Congress is often referred to as the 'broken branch', McCarthy's removal suggests that it is now more broken than ever. It is also significant that leaving Congress without a permanent Speaker for 3 weeks meant that the House could not pass legislation or respond to crises both in the USA and abroad.

The removal of McCarthy highlights the extent to which US political parties are becoming increasingly polarised and ideological. All eight Republicans who voted to remove him are Trump supporters on the fringe right of the Republican Party. The willingness of the House Democrats to remove McCarthy highlights the extent to which hyper-partisanship continues to dominate US politics.

It could be argued that representative democracy has been undermined, as only eight House Republicans voted to remove McCarthy. This raises questions about how well represented most Republican voters and US citizens are by Congress, and whether the majority are being

subjected to tyranny by the minority. Voters who already feel disengaged with – and excluded from – the democratic process are likely to continue to feel alienated, while members of Congress seem to be more interested in keeping their core ideological supporters happy than being willing to compromise, even if compromise is in the national interest.

## Conclusion

The extreme partisanship currently embedded within Congress and the wider political system will make Congress almost ungovernable in the short term. This situation is unlikely to change until after the 2024 elections, when the composition of the House will change. Even then, the expected heightened levels of partisanship and an unwillingness to compromise is likely to result in significant problems for the foreseeable future.

### In-class activities

- 1 Hold a class debate: how much will McCarthy's removal as Speaker have an impact on the results of the 2024 elections? Will the Republican Party be damaged by this infighting?
- 2 Create a list of arguments for and against the view that Congress, more than ever, is now the broken branch.

### Weblinks

Find out more about the government shutdown here: <https://tinyurl.com/2vv9dujj>

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