

[Transcript] The Daily / The Arm-Twisting, Back-Stabbing Battle for House Speaker

From New York Times, I'm Michael Balbaro.

This is The Daily.

The House of Representatives still has no speaker, crippling a vital branch of the government. And it now appears that the Republican in the strongest position to win the job, perhaps as soon as today, is best known for trying to obstruct the government.

I spoke with my colleague, Katie Edmondson, about the latest term in the saga of the leaderless House.

It's Tuesday, October 17th.

So Katie, the last time that The Daily checked in on the soap opera that is the Republican led United States House of Representatives, Speaker Kevin McCarthy had just been ousted from the job.

This was on October 4th.

And so this entire Chamber of Congress was without a leader for the first time in American history.

And a few days after that, I spoke with one of the Republicans who helped oust McCarthy, Representative Tim Burchett of Tennessee.

And he confidently predicted in our conversation that a new speaker would be chosen in just a few days, and it turned out that he was wrong because we're now in our third straight week without a House speaker.

That's right.

I mean, the operative word that we've been using all the time, the word that members themselves have been using to describe this period is chaos.

And it's never a good time for chaos to reign in the House of Representatives, but this is a particularly bad time.

You have two ongoing wars right now.

You have the war in Ukraine.

You have the conflict in Israel and Gaza.

And typically our allies would be looking to the United States to send more military aid to help them.

But without a speaker, the House can't really move forward on any legislation.

So as of now, there's really not an easy path for the US to send any more aid to our allies.

And if you look a little further down the line, there is a deadline looming over all of us in the middle of November for the government to shut down unless Congress passes spending bills to keep it open.

And it is really hard to imagine the House negotiating its side of the deal, essentially, when there's no speaker.

When there's no one to negotiate the deal.

Exactly.

And so this is a really important stretch for Congress, and it's a really bad time, frankly, not to have a speaker in place.

So Katie, why hasn't this all gone the way that Representative Birchett, and I presume many of the people who ousted McCarthy, all thought that it would?

Which is to say, why hasn't there been a quick move to elect a new speaker?

Well, let's go back a couple of weeks to right after Kevin McCarthy was ousted.

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We saw two conservatives who threw their names in the ring to succeed him.

Jordan of Ohio and Steve Scalise of Louisiana.

Good to be with y'all.

Mr. Scalise was Mr. McCarthy's deputy.

He was the number two House Republican, and he's been in Republican leadership in the House for almost a decade now.

Look, we want to solve problems.

Our members have some of the best ideas.

We want to get good conservative policy brought to the floor.

He started his tenure in DC leading the Republican Study Committee, which is a conservative policy oriented faction of House Republicans.

And there are really good ideas that are bipartisan ideas that can get that economy moving again.

And being in leadership for 10 years, this is someone who has been deeply enmeshed in the governance of the institution.

Somebody invested in making the place work rather than this brand of House Republican we've all become very familiar with since the Donald Trump era, who is willing to push the government off a fiscal cliff, shut it down, block almost any spending bill.

Scalise feels like a bit more of a throwback to an earlier kind of more pragmatic Republican.

Yeah, that's right.

I don't think anyone would dispute that he is a conservative lawmaker, but it is not in the type of sort of populist fighter model that has become so popular on Capitol Hill that Jim Jordan really embodies.

So tell us more about the story of Jim Jordan, this second candidate who's always had another ring for speaker.

I always tell folks, don't clap, you haven't heard me say anything yet.

Yeah, Jim Jordan of Ohio was one of the original co-founders of the House Freedom Caucus.

And that was a group of lawmakers that really came to prominence during the Tea Party era.

Here's the pattern.

The government comes to the taxpayers, we need more of your money, we need a boatload of your money, the world's gonna end, we're gonna do it.

You define themselves as really willing to go to extremes, essentially, to try to get what they wanted, which was to disrupt the status quo in Washington.

You can't keep raising the limit on a credit card if you're not going to address the problem long term.

I understand that.

And they showed that they were willing to take, in some cases, the government hostage, such as forcing government shutdowns.

And what I'm saying is we are prepared to do what needs to be done to address the underlying problems in this country.

Biden himself really helped orchestrate a government shutdown in 2013 during the Obama presidency.

And that was one of many factors that led the Republican Speaker of the House, John Boehner, to call him a legislative terrorist.

And then I think more recently, people probably know him as a huge Trump supporter, someone

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who defended Trump during his impeachment inquiries.

Think about it.

The same people who told us you could trust the Steele dossier are now telling us you can trust the results of this election.

The same people...

Someone who stood by President Trump when he falsely claimed that he won the 2020 elections and was one of the House Republicans who actually led the effort to try to overturn the election results on that vote on the House floor on January 6th.

Something doesn't feel right here.

Our president got nine million more votes this time than he did four years ago, and yet he comes up short.

Even though we gained seats in the House of Representatives, something doesn't feel right.

And now, of course, he's leading the charge or helping to lead the charge to impeach President Biden.

So unlike Representative Scalise, who is already in House Republican leadership and is seen as a team player and a policy-oriented conservative, Jordan is more of a renegade, more of an insurgent.

And the idea of him leading the House for many, I'm guessing, would seem a little bit more like a stretch than perhaps Scalise.

Yeah, that's right.

I don't think the arc from legislative terrorist to speaker is, you know, necessary...

A well-worn path.

Yeah, exactly.

But, you know, Republicans have this closed-door meeting in the middle of last week to decide their party's nominee for speaker.

And as you might expect, Scalise emerges with the most support, but it's not an overwhelming victory.

It's the 113 votes to Jordan's 99.

Right.

Not exactly a landslide by 14 votes.

Yeah, that's right.

And you see sort of the breakdown in those votes that you might expect.

Now, it was a secret vote, but we know from what lawmakers told us that, in general, a lot of the more mainstream conservatives backed Scalise and the Freedom Caucus, the hard-right lawmakers, are backing Jordan.

So normally, at that juncture in time, lawmakers, regardless of whether they voted for Scalise or not, would pretty much fall in line behind him because...

He's the nominee?

He's the nominee.

Exactly.

They'd swallow their pride and vote for him pretty much unanimously.

But instead, after he wins the nomination, we almost start to see immediately his support erode.

Why?

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Well, first, it doesn't help that Jordan didn't endorse him.
Normally after that kind of vote, you would expect to see the person who lost say, all right, it's time for the conference to unify, let's all vote for Steve.
And Jordan did not do that.
He did not do it inside the conference room.
And he notably declined to do so to reporters, even though we asked him several times.
And so this all starts to sort of pile up.
You see lawmakers who said that they voted for Scalise start to voice some misgivings.
You see some hard-right lawmakers start to negotiate really in the press with Scalise, saying that there are certain pet issues that they want a commitment from him that he'll adopt.
It's not an easy task, you gotta listen to people.
And in what might be the cruelest cut of all, Kevin McCarthy finds a TV camera and says...
Time is of the essence, there's not that much time left.
Boy, you know, Steve really is having a tough time.
Do you think it's possible that he can get the votes?
Possible.
It's a big hill, though.
He told a lot of people he's going to be at 150 and he wasn't there, so...
He's got an uphill battle here and I don't know if he'll have the votes.
And what do you make of that?
Because he had been Scalise's partner in governing the whole house.
Well, that's right.
I mean, I think historically there has been a lot of animosity, or there often is a lot of animosity between the number one and number two in the house and that certainly was true for McCarthy and Scalise.
There's a history of bad blood there and so that was really him publicly twisting the knife.
So, instead of Scalise finding that people are rallying around him, everyone is shiving him and demanding some special dispensation and this is not going very well at all.
So, Scalise is trying to turn the tide here, essentially.
He's on the phone calling lawmakers.
He's meeting with them one-on-one in the leadership suite.
He's having some of the holdouts come meet with him and his allies in groups, just trying to find a way, essentially, to break this impasse.
But it's just not working and he continues to keep just hemorrhaging votes.
So by the end of last week, he does the math.
Hey, first let me, I know we've been following this, it's been quite a journey.
He realizes that he does not have the votes to become speaker.
I just share with my colleagues that I'm withdrawing my name as a candidate for the speaker designee.
And he announces that he's withdrawing from running for speaker.
This country is counting on us to come back together and there's still schisms that have to get resolved.

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Are you in 1042?

Thank you.

Are you in Georgia?

Are you in Georgia, Jim Jordan?

Which of course leaves one candidate for the speakership standing, Jim Jordan, who, as we've said, doesn't exactly seem too many like leadership material, but he's the only candidate.

Yeah, that's right.

Now it becomes Jim Jordan's race to win or lose.

And there were a lot of questions as to whether the more mainstream Republicans, whether moderate

Republicans in tough swing seats who are up for tough reelection battles next year would be willing to fall in line behind him.

I heard from some lawmakers saying, you know, I really want to be done with this.

I want to elect a speaker, but I really don't want to reward this hard right minority that has essentially taken us all hostage.

So that's where things stood at the end of last week.

And at that point, House Republican leadership told their lawmakers it was fine for them to go home for the weekend back to their districts.

And that was when Jim Jordan unleashed this really remarkable lobbying campaign, the likes of which we've never really seen before for this job against these hold apps that was so intense and to many people off-putting, honestly, that the question became, is this campaign going to work and going to deliver him the speakership, or is it going to alienate so many lawmakers that they simply refuse to give him the job?

We'll be right back.

So Katie, tell us more about this intense, unusual lobbying campaign that Jim Jordan and Barks on to try to win over House Republicans who aren't ready to support him as speaker. So remember, in that initial vote, Jordan got fewer votes than Scalise.

So we know right off the bat that there are many members, in fact, nearly half the conference who didn't immediately support him.

So they hold another vote and a bunch of lawmakers swing over to his side out of wanting to wrap this whole spectacle up.

But at the end of the day, around 50 of them vote against Jordan, essentially saying, there's no way we're supporting you.

Which is a lot of Republicans to stand in your way if you're trying to become speaker.

It's a big block of opposition.

And so what Jordan's allies begin to do essentially is to browbeat members into supporting him.

And how do they try to browbeat them?

So the idea here is that Jordan is going to activate the base, hardcore Republican voters, the grassroots.

And so a number of Jordan allies, really prominent figures, almost influencer type figures within conservative media, start to post the photos of lawmakers who are refusing to back Jordan.

They post their names.

And crucially, they post their DC office phone numbers saying, if you are a true conservative,

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if you are a patriot, you need to call this lawmaker and demand that they vote for Jim Jordan for speaker or else.

Which is typically what you do when you want a piece of legislation to pass.

You tell constituents to call their lawmaker and support this bill.

Here it's being used to demand that constituents call and tell their congressperson to vote for Jim Jordan as speaker.

It's being used as a cudgel.

And frankly, given the reach of a lot of these influencers, it's not even asking just the constituents of that lawmaker's district.

The message is really any concerned citizen needs to flood these lawmakers' phone lines and give them a piece of your mind.

And that's what happens.

And Michael, I mean, you know this, one of the biggest fears for Republican lawmakers is that they are going to be primaried for being insufficiently conservative.

And so what happens is when your name is being plastered across social media as someone who is not supporting who the base wants, that begins to activate those fears that maybe you'll be primaried.

You could be run out of Congress for this.

So it's a really potent campaign.

So you're seeing this deluge of calls really to these lawmakers' offices.

And then kind of the cherry on top of the Sunday is that Sean Hannity gets involved.

A member of Congress shares an email with an Axios reporter up on the hill that they received from someone working for the Hannity show, asking for comment about why they're not supporting Jim Jordan.

And I think when you look at this email, I think most reporters would agree that the phrasing of the email is not necessarily just the facts, are you supporting Mr. Jordan up or down?

Can you read it?

Hold on, let me find it.

So it begins, hello, Stephanie from the Hannity show with Fox News.

Sources tell Hannity that representative so-and-so is not supporting representative Jim Jordan for Speaker.

Can you please let me know if this is accurate?

And if true, Hannity would like to know why during a war breaking out between Israel and Hamas, with the war in Ukraine, with the wide open borders, with a budget that's unfinished, why would representative so-and-so be against representative Jim Jordan for Speaker?

Please let us know when representative so-and-so plans on opening the people's house so work can be done.

So what Jordan and his allies are clearly wagering here is that with these implicit threats, they can kind of strong arm the majority of those in the house who originally opposed Jordan and bring them around to the minority view that Jim Jordan, this far right pugilistic insurgent conservative, should be the House Speaker, and really doing that through a series of threats.

Yeah, that's right.

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I mean, the message is if you don't turn around and support me now, we will unleash the base on you.

But the thing is, Michael, is that it seems to be working.

There were a number of Republicans who we spoke to at the end of last week who are telling us, I will never vote for Jim Jordan, count me as a never Jordan, he'll never have my vote who, as of Monday morning, were suddenly putting out statements saying, well, I've had time to reconsider and I spoke with Congressman Jordan and actually, you know, I think he'll make a good Speaker and we should really be united and anyway, yes, I'll be supporting him on the floor.

So he's already won some really important converts.

And with this strategy in mind, he has scheduled a vote on the House floor Tuesday at noon. And really the beauty of this strategy in his eyes is that even though the math is coming his way, even though he seems to be feeling pretty good about the support he'll get on the House floor, from his perspective, even if he has a small number of lawmakers continuing to block him from winning that Speaker's gavel, it almost doesn't matter because once those constituents see their lawmaker publicly standing up on the House floor and blocking Jim Jordan from becoming Speaker, then they're really going to hear it and by maybe the end of the day, maybe by the next day, they will cave and let him become Speaker.

Got it.

So even if Jim Jordan on Tuesday loses the first few rounds of votes in the same way that Kevin McCarthy did back in January, you're saying that would invite such holy hell on the Republicans who oppose him that they would inevitably consider buckling and voting for Jordan just to get everyone off their back and avoid the political mayhem of opposing him.

That is exactly the bet that Jim Jordan is making.

So let's say, Katie, that by the end of Tuesday, Jim Jordan is elected Speaker of the United States House of Representatives.

It will have clearly been through this perhaps creative but ultimately fear-based strategy rather than through having genuinely cultivated the affections of his fellow Republicans.

So what kind of mandate would that represent for a Speaker Jordan?

Yeah, it's a really good question.

I mean, it's hard to imagine honestly at this point what the House as a governing institution looks like run by a Speaker, Jim Jordan, but in a way it is kind of a perfect arc for this entire year.

You had a small minority of far-right Republicans blocking Kevin McCarthy from becoming Speaker at the beginning of the year.

You have an even smaller group, just eight Republicans toppling him earlier this month.

And then you have someone who really is one of them who shares their ideology, who shares their belief in tactical warfare becoming Speaker at the end of the day.

Right.

It's a fascinating arc, but I wonder what it means if Jordan wins for those far-right House Republicans and for the entire institution.

Because for the longest time, like you just said, those far-right House Republicans, the obstructionists, the insurgents, they have been seen by the Speaker as the problem children,

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right?

They're the ones who block everything.

They have to be managed, dealt with.

If one of them is now running the whole House, does that mean that those far-right obstructionists are suddenly much more empowered?

They're now kind of running the place?

Or does it mean that their power has to be diluted and they have to learn to start negotiating?

Because that's what always happens when the outsider and the insurgent becomes the leader of a place.

I mean, if he is elected Speaker, that is going to be the central question of his tenure.

This is someone who was branded in his early days as a legislative terrorist.

This is someone who creates chaos rather than solves it.

If you look at Kevin McCarthy, when faced with the choice of placating the hard-right rebels of his conference and ensuring that government could work, he chose every time cutting a deal with Democrats to make sure that the government could work.

And it cost him his job.

I don't know what choice Jim Jordan makes.

I don't know that Jim Jordan is willing to cut a deal with Democrats to keep the government open, for example.

But what I think is clear is that if Jim Jordan wins the Speaker's gavel today, we are going to see for the first time what it means to have the far-right faction of the House Republican conference not just sitting at the table, but also the House Republican Congress, not just sitting at the table, but in fact have the final say in some of the biggest decisions made by the United States Congress.

At a moment when some very, very big decisions have to be made.

Exactly.

Katie, thank you very much.

Thanks, Michael.

The Times reports that as of late Monday night, Representative Jordan had won over all but around 10 Republican holdouts and is counting on most of them to cave under pressure today during a series of votes on the House floor.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you need to know today.

President Biden will travel to Israel tomorrow as it prepares to invade Gaza and attempts to destroy Hamas.

The trip will serve as an extraordinary wartime demonstration of American solidarity with Israel, one designed to deter Israel's enemies, including Iran and Syria, from intervening in the conflict.

And it will further link both Biden and the United States to Israel's deadly offensive in Gaza.

On Monday, in a sign of just how bloody that military operation may become, Israel's Defense Minister told the U.S. Secretary of State that the invasion of Gaza would entail a long war that will come at a great cost to human life.

The federal judge overseeing the criminal trial of Donald Trump on charges of trying

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to overturn the 2020 election has imposed a gag order on the former president. The order, which Trump plans to appeal, restricts him from making public statements attacking the witnesses, prosecutors, or court staff involved in the case, something Trump has already done repeatedly.

Judge Tanya Chutkan said that Trump can still publicly argue that the case is politically motivated and even attack her, but that he cannot, quote, vilify and implicitly encourage violence against public servants who are simply doing their jobs.

Today's episode was produced by Alex Stern, Mary Wilson, and Will Reed.

It was edited by Rachel Quester, contains original music by Mary and Lozano and Dan Powell, and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Lansford of Underly.

That's it for the Daily.

I'm Michael Balbarro.

See you tomorrow.