



GOP CONSERVATIVES SHUTTER HOUSE TO PROTEST MCCARTHY- BIDEN DEBT DEAL, SETTING UP NEXT BUDGET BRAWL - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Photo: House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of Calif., leaves his office on Capitol Hill

In fallout from the debt ceiling deal, Speaker Kevin McCarthy is suddenly confronting a new threat to his power as angry hard-right conservatives bring the House chamber to a halt, reviving their displeasure over the compromise struck with President Joe Biden and demanding deeper spending cuts ahead.

Barely a dozen Republicans, mainly members of the House Freedom Caucus, shuttered House business for a second day Thursday in protest of McCarthy's leadership. Routine votes could not be taken, and a pair of pro-gas stove bills important to GOP activists stalled out. Some lawmakers asked if they could simply go home.

McCarthy brushed off the disruption as healthy political debate, part of his "risk taker" way of being a leader — not too different, he said, from the 15-vote spectacle it took in January for him to finally convince his colleagues to elect him as speaker. With a paper-thin GOP majority, any few Republicans have outsized sway.

But the aftermath of the debt ceiling deal is coming into focus: The hard-right flank that helped put the speaker in power five months ago is not done with McCarthy yet.

"I enjoy this conflict," the speaker bantered Wednesday at the Capitol, saying he feels like Goldilocks being pushed from all sides. "Conflict makes you stronger if you deal with it."

At its core, the standoff between the House conservatives and the speaker revolves around the budget levels McCarthy agreed to in the debt-ceiling bill with Biden that the right flank of his conference strenuously opposed. The agreement restricted spending, but not as much as the Freedom Caucus and others demanded. Unable to stop the debt bill's passage last week, the conservatives are now digging in and preparing for a longer fight to prevent it from taking hold.

It's all setting the stage for a potentially disastrous showdown ahead, when Congress will need to pass spending bills to fund the

government at the levels set by the McCarthy-Biden debt package, or risk a shutdown in federal government operations when the new fiscal year starts Oct. 1.

The test will likely come even sooner, this summer, when the Biden administration is expected to ask Congress to approve supplemental funding for Ukraine to fight the war against Russia. It's an issue that splits the Republicans between those who want to cut budgets and those insisting on a strong military.

Aligning with the defense hawks, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell raised his own concerns Wednesday about the cap on military spending: "I'm not sure at this point how to fix it, but it's a problem, a serious problem."

While the conservatives have aired a long list of grievances, the debt deal looms largest.

The McCarthy-Biden compromise set overall federal budget caps — holding spending flat for 2024, and with a 1% growth for 2025 — and Congress still needs to pass appropriations bills to fund the various federal agencies at the agreed-to amounts. That's typically done by Oct. 1. After Biden signed the debt deal into law last weekend, lawmakers have been fast at work on the agency-spending bills ahead of votes this summer to meet the deadline.

Not only did the conservatives object to the deal with Biden as insufficient, they claim it violated the terms of an agreement they had reached with McCarthy to roll back spending even further, to 2022 levels, to make him speaker.

"There was an agreement in January," Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., told reporters after he left the speaker's office Wednesday morning. "And it was violated in the debt-ceiling bill."

McCarthy insists the agreement he made during the speakers race to roll back spending to 2022 was not a guaranteed outcome, only a goal. Besides, the debt deal has a provision that would automatically return spending to the 2022 level if Congress fails to put in place all the funding bills by January.

"We never promised we're going to be all at '22 levels — I said we would strive to get to the '22 level or the equivalent amount," McCarthy said Wednesday. "We've met all that criteria."

McCarthy also said he's not opposed to more funding for Ukraine, but he wants to see exactly what's needed rather than simply agree to undoing the spending caps that he negotiated with Biden and that were just signed into law.

Democrats watching the fallout from the debt-ceiling deal are mindful of the challenges ahead.

"I think it's going to be tough," said Rep. Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee.

"You've got a whole bunch of people who want to cut back," she said of the Republicans. "Potentially they could hold up appropriations."

If Congress fails to pass the spending bills by fall it risks a federal government shutdown — an outcome conservatives have forced multiple times before, starting in the Clinton era when then-Speaker Newt Gingrich led the House into a budget standoff, and again in 2013 when conservatives shut down the government as they tried to repeal the Affordable Care Act.

The longest federal shutdown in history was during the Trump era when Congress refused his demands for money to build the border wall between the U.S. and Mexico.

For now, McCarthy and his leadership team need to just figure out how to bring the House chamber back into session.

"This is insane," said Republican Rep. Steve Womack of Arkansas. "This is not the way a governing majority is expected to behave, and

frankly, I think there will be a political cost to it."



The bills on tap this week were not the most pressing on the agenda, but are popular among Republicans and carry important political messages even if they have no chance of becoming law.

Among them is a pair of bills related to gas stoves, including one that would prohibit the use of federal funds to regulate gas stoves as a hazardous product.

House action came to a sudden halt midday Tuesday when the band of conservatives refused to support a routine procedural vote to set the rules schedule for the day's debate. It was the first time in some 20 years a routine rules vote was defeated.

Associated Press writers Kevin Freking, Stephen Groves, Mary Clare Jalonick and Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.