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Nancy Pelosi, wearing a bright pink blazer, lifts a gavel high in the air

Outgoing U.S. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., a Catholic, wields the gavel inside the House Chamber on the first day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol in Washington Jan. 3, 2023. (CNSphoto/Evelyn Hockstein, Reuters)

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The election for speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives bled into a third day when Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., failed to secure a majority of votes to win the office after six rounds of voting over two days Jan. 3 and 4.

The last time a U.S. House speaker failed to win on the first ballot in the chamber was 1923, making McCarthy's losses a once-in-a-century event. Until a new speaker is elected, the House cannot conduct any new business, leaving the congressional chamber effectively paralyzed in the interim.

With McCarthy unable to meet the required threshold after two days of voting, the House instead voted to adjourn in a dramatic session the evening of Jan. 4.

To take the office, the House speaker must win 218 votes, or a simple majority of the House members.

But McCarthy, who hopes to oversee what is a slim House majority -- just 222 Republicans versus 213 Democrats -- failed to meet that threshold when 21 members of his party did not vote for him in the sixth round, a number that grew from 19 in earlier rounds.

The Democrats' nominee, Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., received more votes than McCarthy in each round as Democrats voted as a block; however, the Democratic House minority leader could only win the speakership in the unlikely scenario of picking up five Republican votes.

Republican Rep. Mike Gallagher, a Catholic from Wisconsin, nominated McCarthy for the fourth round of voting, and acknowledged in his remarks on the House floor that multiple failed rounds of voting in the speaker election "looks messy."

"But democracy is messy," said Gallagher, arguing that this was by "design."

"That's a feature, not a bug of our system," Gallagher said, arguing the House should have a debate, but he views McCarthy as the best candidate.

McCarthy's Republican opponents sought commitments from him on some of their preferred rules or legislation, such as holding a vote on legislation imposing term limits on members of Congress or enacting rules making it easier to oust a House speaker.

Rep. Alex Mooney, R-W.Va., a Catholic and an ally of former President Donald Trump who intends to challenge fellow Catholic Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., for the Senate in 2024, echoed that sentiment.

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"We keep voting 'til someone gets 218 votes," Mooney said in a video posted to Twitter. "Thus far, I've been voting for Kevin McCarthy, but some Republican at some point ... needs to get 218 votes."

As the rounds of voting went on throughout the day, McCarthy lost a vote from Rep. Victoria Spartz, R-Ind., who previously voted for him but eventually chose to vote

"present" instead.

Spartz, who is the first Ukrainian-born immigrant to serve in the U.S. Congress and is Eastern Orthodox, said in a statement she ultimately switched her vote because "we have a constitutional duty to elect the speaker of the House, but we have to deliberate further as a Republican conference until we have enough votes and stop wasting everyone's time."

"None of the Republican candidates have this number yet," Spartz said. "That's why I voted present after all votes were cast."

Some political commentators speculated McCarthy may attempt to win over a handful of Democratic supporters to reach 218 votes, but Democrats have little incentive to do so. Their party controls both the White House and Senate, and lost the House by only a slim margin.

Some Democrats likened the proceedings to a show. Rep. Ted Lieu, D-Calif., who is Catholic, tweeted a picture of himself holding a bag of popcorn Jan. 3.

In remarks to reporters at the White House, President Joe Biden shrugged off the House GOP's speaker race drama Jan. 3, saying "that's not my problem."

Biden, the nation's second Catholic president, called the delay in choosing a speaker "a little embarrassing," adding, "The rest of the world is looking; they're looking at 'are we getting our act together?'"

On Jan. 3, Biden traveled to Kentucky with Republican Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell to tout the bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

The House adjourned until noon Jan. 5, when it planned to begin another round of votes for speaker.