Opinion
NCR Voices



Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, speaks at the 2021 AmericaFest at the Phoenix Convention Center in Arizona. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)



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Halloween is coming early this year. This week, the Republican caucus in the House of Representatives will gather to select a new speaker, the person who will control the legislative agenda of the lower chamber of Congress and who also will stand second in the line of presidential succession after the vice president. The options are ghoulish.

The fear emerges that to secure enough votes among the extreme MAGA Republicans who voted to oust Kevin McCarthy, these ghouls will have to demonstrate a willingness to eat the dead body of democracy.

GOP Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene announced on X, formerly known as Twitter, that she was supporting Donald Trump for the vacant speakership, explaining how he could be elected. The Constitution does not specify that the speaker be a member of the House, but a GOP rule might prevent Trump from grabbing the gavel: "Rule 26: A member of the Republican Leadership shall step aside if indicted for a felony for which a sentence of two or more years' imprisonment may be imposed."

Of course, Trump didn't let a little thing like losing an election keep him from clinging to his previous office, and if he wanted the GOP caucus to ignore or remove Rule 26, does anyone think they would refuse him?

Politico reported that Trump is considering a visit to Capitol Hill, but it isn't clear whether he wants the gavel or just wants to make sure the contenders kiss his ring.

Next closest to Trump ideologically is Ohio Rep. Jim Jordan, currently the chair of the Judiciary Committee. At The Washington Post, Philip Bump employs some metrics to show just how extreme Jordan is. The MAGA members who refused to back McCarthy's bid to be speaker last January for 15 ballots voted for Jordan multiple times, and are mostly throwing their support behind his bid now.

Jordan told NBC News that he had spoken with the former president about his bid but would not disclose whether or not Trump supported him. It wasn't clear if he was being coy, but before the week was out, Trump had endorsed Jordan's bid for the speakership.

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One thing could stand in Jordan's way: lingering, but unproven, allegations that while serving as an assistant wrestling coach at Ohio State University, he turned a blind eye to sexual abuse by the team's doctor. That is the kind of story that breaks through normal partisan news outlets.

The current majority leader, Louisiana Rep. Steve Scalise, has also announced his candidacy. He may be slightly to the center of Jordan, but was the more conservative member of McCarthy's leadership team. That could be the ticket to securing enough votes to win. Scalise is also the beneficiary of enormous personal sympathy after he survived an assassination attempt while practicing with the GOP baseball team.

Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole, who chairs the powerful House Rules Committee, has been mentioned. He steadfastly supported McCarthy and is one of the longest-serving members of the House Republican caucus. Cole is widely respected on both sides of the aisle, which probably makes it more likely my dog Damiana could win the votes of the MAGA members than Cole. (For the record, Damiana is a Democrat and would not consent to the job.)

How did we get in this mess? In part, every concession McCarthy made to the far-right members of his caucus only served to empower, not to satiate, them.

Another part of the problem is Trump derangement syndrome, the systematic overturning of political norms, the crashing through procedural guardrails in an effort to be ever more provocative, the fixation on applause from the social media mob and Fox News hosts.

The derangement, however, has to do also with our political system's most deeply seated cancer, gerrymandering. Aided by computer modeling, many state legislatures now draw district lines guaranteeing one party or the other can dominate a general election, so the only real threat to an incumbent comes in the primaries. Primary elections are usually low-turnout events in which only the most motivated voters show up and the most motivated voters, on both the left and the right, tend to be more extreme than the average voter.

For example, the Cook Political Report's "Partisan Voter Index" rates the district represented by Taylor-Greene, Georgia's 14th Congressional District, as a +27 GOP district. No Democrat can win that district. California's 12th District, represented by former Speaker Nancy Pelosi, earns a +37 Democratic rating, meaning no Republican has a shot there.

Until we have nonpartisan redistricting, the House of Representatives will be pulled more and more to the extremes.

No doubt someone in Las Vegas will be taking odds on who will emerge from this self-inflicted mess the Republicans have made. But this is no longer odd. Like everything else in our political system, the new normal is more deranged, more detached from the kitchen table concerns of most Americans, and more nasty. It is difficult to imagine what will rejuvenate American democracy at a time like this.