

## Santos Expelled From House in Lopsided Vote

December 2, 2023 **by Dan McCue**



WASHINGTON — The House of Representatives voted to expel Rep. George Santos, R-N.Y., on Friday, leaving the chamber's Republican leadership — all of whom voted in favor of the embattled congressman staying — with one fewer member in their already razor-thin majority.

Friday's 311-114-2 vote came after months of revelations about Santos' alleged misdeeds and untruths but occurred amidst an air of "anything could happen" as his colleagues gathered in the House chamber.

"What do you think will happen?" a congressman asked reporters in an elevator in the Capitol before the vote.

Everyone in the lift agreed they believed Santos was toast when they got up this morning, but had begun to waver as the hour of the vote approached.

In the end, the chamber moved quickly, reaching the two-thirds majority needed to oust the Long Island congressman in less than five minutes, with 105 Republicans voting for the measure and 114 against.

Two members voted present.

Santos himself walked out of the chamber before the vote was finished and quickly descended down the steps leading from the second to first floor of the Capitol and jumped into a car that had been idling outside.

Santos' brief appearance between the door of the building and the car caused dozens of reporters and camera people to surge toward him.

"Why would I want to stay here?" he said when a reporter asked if he was heading over to his office in the Longworth House Office Building.

"To hell with this place," he said.

Even as he spoke, the doorway to his office in the Longworth building was becoming something of a weird shrine.

Someone unseen by reporters left two bouquets of white flowers outside the door, and a blond-haired, sheepish young man in a wool cap stopped by the office later to drop off what he would only describe as "a note for the congressman."

Meanwhile, across the street in the House chamber, Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., solemnly announced the result of the vote, and also that "the new whole number of the House is 343."

Of course, to those who voted against him Friday, Santos was the architect of his own undoing.

Over the course of a political career that began just two years ago, when he first announced he was running for the seat in New York's 3rd Congressional District, Santos has been accused of engaging in a number of crooked schemes involving campaign donations and lying about huge swaths of his personal and professional biography.

The US Capitol early Friday morning, ahead of the vote to oust Rep. George Santos, R-NY. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Among those falsehoods were claims, made both in writing and orally, that he worked at both Citigroup and Goldman Sachs, amassing a small fortune in the process.

He also claimed to be descended from Holocaust survivors; that his mother was in the World Trade Center during the Sept. 11 attacks; and that he lost four employees in the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida.

His purported lies made him the subject of a 23-count federal indictment and led to an investigation by the House Ethics Committee, which released a scathing, 56-page report about Santos two weeks ago that brought the matter to a head on Friday.

A second, superseding indictment filed in October tacked on additional charges over accusations he inflated his campaign finance reports and charged donors' credit cards without authorization.

With his expulsion, Santos became the first person in history to be tossed out of the House without first either being convicted of a serious crime or engaging in an insurrection by supporting the Confederacy.

While the report did not recommend formal sanctions, it renewed calls for Santos' expulsion, something lawmakers had tried twice earlier this year without success.

But down to the last, the few proponents Santos had in the chamber argued against showing him the door, saying it would set a dangerous precedent for the chamber going forward.

On the floor of the House on Thursday, Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., argued, "Whatever Mr. Santos did ... is less concerning to me than the indictment against Sen. Menendez, who is holding gold bars inscribed with Arabic on them from Egypt while he's still getting classified briefings today."

Gaetz was referring to Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., who was indicted earlier this year on bribery charges.

"I rise not to defend George Santos, whoever he is," Gaetz said.

He was speaking out, he said, to make a point about precedent.

Even more vocal was Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Fla., who spoke angrily on the Capitol steps about the vote to remove Santos shortly after it occurred on Friday.

"What we're talking about is a concept that goes back to the framers of this nation, a concept that goes back to the Magna

Carta. ... You have to allow the legal process to play out and the adjudication to be complete before you do something like this,” Donalds said. “It should never be cut short because of political preferences.

“I know people are going to say, ‘Oh, my God, he’s so emphatically defending George Santos.’ No, I am emphatically defending the rule of law and the ability of a free people to govern themselves,” he said. “It can’t be done by the whims of random politicians. That’s how the Roman Republic fell. And if we continue these kinds of actions, the same thing will happen to us.”

When a reporter said Donalds seemed truly upset, the representative said he was.

“And it’s not about the actions of George Santos. It’s the fact that everybody should be afforded their day in court. That’s been the standard in America for our entire history. Now we have a new standard — one that says people can lose their capacity to earn a living and care for their families merely because they’ve been accused of wrongdoing. Is that the standard of America going forward? If so, I shudder for the future of our country.”

But Rep. Daniel Goldman, D-N.Y., vehemently disagreed.

During a press conference before the vote, a briefing at which he was joined by Jody Kass, Kim Keiserman and Susan Naftol, all

voters living in Santos' district, Goldman said whatever else he was guilty of, Santos deceived the voters in his district in order to be elected and that, on its own, warranted his expulsion.

Though he acknowledged that "unlike many other public corruption cases, the Ethics Committee decided to release a recommendation before the criminal case was completed," he also noted that Santos has publicly acknowledged at least some of his wrongdoing.

In addition, Goldman said, "Santos was provided with an opportunity to meet with the committee, but he declined that opportunity.

"Congress is not a court of law. George Santos' liberty is not at stake. And the concept of being innocent until proven guilty does not exist in the Congress of the United States. This is a vote about whether or not you believe in democracy or you believe in cynical partisanship," Goldman said.

Through it all, Santos appeared to hardly blink.

During an early morning press conference on Thursday, Santos was defiant, vowing to file a "slew of complaints" before his ouster to "make sure ... we keep the playing field even."

At the same time, he also announced that he planned to file a motion for a vote on expelling Rep. Jamaal Bowman, D-N.Y.

Bowman was charged last month with a misdemeanor for falsely pulling a fire alarm in a House office building ahead of a key vote.

He later pleaded guilty to one misdemeanor and agreed to pay a fine and write an apology to the Capitol Police.

Santos described his effort to oust Bowman as a matter of “consistency.”

“Here, we have a member of Congress who took a plea deal for pulling a fire alarm ... which obstructed and delayed an official hearing ... on the House floor,” he said.

“Now, had that been any other person ... had it been a Republican member of Congress, we all know that that person would’ve been fired, would’ve been charged with obstructing a congressional hearing ... but Jamaal Bowman gets a pass,” he continued.

Now that Santos is gone, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, must, under state law, set the date for a special election within the next 10 days, and the election itself must occur between 70 and 80 days later.

That would mean the special election to replace Santos would occur either in late February or early March. Until then, a congressional district office will remain open to deal with constituent issues.

Because Santos previously announced he would not seek reelection regardless of the outcome of the House vote, a number of candidates have already queued up to vie for the seat in a district that encompasses a swath of Nassau County and parts of neighboring Queens County.



They included former Rep. Tom Suozzi, D-N.Y., who held the seat for three terms before giving it up to run for governor in 2022.

Two other Democrats are also running for the seat. They are former state Sen. Anna Kaplan and Austin Cheng, who is currently chief executive officer of the Gramercy Surgery Center in New York City.

Among the Republicans who have already thrown their hats in the ring are former New York Police Department detective Mike Sapraicone and businessman and Air Force veteran Kellen Curry.

As for the special election, Nassau County Democratic Chair Jay Jacobs has said Suozzi and Robert Zimmerman, the longtime Democrat who lost to Santos in 2022, are on his short list of potential candidates.

In a statement posted on the Nassau County GOP's website on Friday, party Chair Joseph Cairo Jr. said his committee, along with a representative of the Queens County Republicans, "is conducting interviews and expects to announce its candidate in the 3rd District in the very near future."

Rep. Anthony D'Esposito, R-N.Y., whose district is near Santos', appeared to dismiss any concerns, telling reporters that Nassau and Suffolk Counties are "a bright shade of red."

When Republican New York Rep. Nick LaLota was asked if he is concerned the seat could flip to a Democrat, he told reporters, "Good government is good politics, and if we do the right thing here and fulfill New York's expectations to expel a total fraud, I think there's good politics to be had after that. But yes, it's a risk.

"We're going to remove a Republican, narrow our majority, but I think that's good government. ... The voters will benefit us for it," he added.



A debate on the House floor on Thursday had captured the absurdity and unseemliness of Santos' scandals. His use of campaign funds on Botox treatments was invoked several times, even by those defending him. His detractors pointed to invented ties to the Holocaust and to his claims, contradicted by paperwork, that his mother was at the World Trade Center on Sept. 11.

“George Santos is a liar — in fact, he has admitted to many of them — who has used his position of public trust to personally benefit himself from day one,” said D’Esposito, who is Santos’ closest congressional neighbor and most ardent foe.

Even as criminal charges piled up, Santos, 35, had seemed poised to outrun accountability, surviving two previous expulsion efforts thanks to the influence of Johnson and his predecessor, **former Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.**

Johnson and his entire leadership team voted against expulsion Friday morning. McCarthy, who was ousted as speaker earlier this fall, did not vote.

They did not want to lose Santos' vote or risk losing his seat to a Democrat in a special election. And they voiced what became the core of Santos' defense: expelling him before he was convicted or found culpable by the House Ethics Committee would set a dangerous precedent.

Santos immediately declared that he would not seek reelection. Democrats and Republicans alike rushed to condemn him, including the Republican chairman of the House Ethics Committee, Michael Guest of Mississippi, who personally moved to have Santos removed from office.

"We followed the Constitution and the way that this was to play out," Guest said on Friday as he stood before the House chamber. "And then the members of Congress voted today. I take no pride in what has happened today."

The territory covered by the ethics report overlaps significantly with the accusations in Santos' criminal case. Investigators found "substantial evidence" that Santos broke federal law. Still, he refused to resign, even as he said he expected to be removed from the House.

His forced departure will leave a fractious Republican Conference with an even thinner majority in Congress, exacerbating the challenges the party will face to achieve its legislative agenda.

The Republican Party chairman in Nassau County has been vetting possible candidates for months, while Democratic leaders have privately indicated that they would most likely put forward

Suozzi, who held the seat before Santos but relinquished it to run for governor.

That decision cleared the way for Santos' election last year, one of several Republican victories that flipped Democratic districts in New York, helping his party clinch control of the House. His win was also celebrated as a milestone: The son of Brazilian immigrants, Santos was the first openly gay Republican to win a House seat as a non-incumbent candidate.

But shortly before he took office, a New York Times investigation found that his rags-to-riches journey from a basement apartment in Queens to the halls of Congress was built on layers of fabrication, exaggeration and omission.

None of those claims were true.

Santos is only the sixth member of the House to be expelled in the body's history. Three representatives were removed in 1861 on charges of treason at the start of the Civil War. Two others were convicted in criminal court before being expelled, one in 1980 and the most recent in 2002.

Santos must still contend with the federal indictment in which prosecutors have accused him of multiple criminal schemes. In May, prosecutors charged him with wire fraud, unlawful monetary transactions, stealing public funds and lying on federal disclosure forms.

In October, prosecutors added more charges in a superseding indictment, accusing Santos of falsifying a \$500,000 campaign loan, stealing the identities of donors to his campaign and using their credit card information to transfer money to his personal bank account.

While Santos' lies fueled his notoriety and cemented his public reputation as a fraudster, it was larger questions about his finances and campaign practices that sparked the indictments and ethics report.

Much of the speculation surrounding Santos has been tied to the source of the more than \$700,000 he claimed to have lent his political campaign in 2022.

The scene on the Capitol steps immediately after the House voted to oust George Santos,

R-N.Y. (Photo by Dan McCue)

When Santos first ran for office in 2020, he filed a financial disclosure with the House saying that he was making only \$55,000 a year. Two years later, he claimed to be making a \$750,000 salary from his own firm, the Devolder Organization.

Santos said the firm had dividends between \$1 million and \$5 million, and that he had millions of dollars in savings and a checking account with between \$100,000 and \$250,000.

In their report, House ethics investigators said those claims were false.

They also detailed how Santos used money from donors to perpetuate a fabulous and fraudulent lifestyle, documenting campaign spending on designer clothes, luxury hotels, Botox and OnlyFans.

The Ethics Committee found evidence that Santos had fraudulently reimbursed himself for loans he never made, earning \$27,000 in profit during his unsuccessful 2020 campaign.

Federal prosecutors said that Santos again falsified loans in 2022 in order to make his campaign look more financially robust, reporting a \$500,000 donation to his campaign in March that he did not actually make.

The Ethics Committee report said that real money came through months later to fill the hole, but it nonetheless raised questions about whether it was transferred legally.

Santos and his treasurer, Nancy Marks, have been charged with making up tens of thousands of dollars in donations on campaign finance reports, to give the impression that Santos' campaign was attracting significant attention.

Marks pleaded guilty to a felony count of conspiracy to defraud the United States in October and admitted to her role in fraudulently reporting the fictitious loan and donations.

Santos, who has pleaded not guilty to all charges, is due back in court on Dec. 12, and is scheduled to go to trial in September.

Outside his district office in the Douglaston neighborhood of Queens, some of his constituents gathered outside to take selfies and commemorate the moment. One passing motorist offered his thoughts in a decidedly New York fashion.

“Good riddance, you piece of crap,” screamed John Johnson, 60, from his car as he was stopped at a light in front of the office.

“I thought that Republicans would save him,” he added. “But I guess they came to their senses last minute.”

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