

House GOP Conference Taps Johnson as Fourth Speaker Designee

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Rep. Mike Johnson, R-La., speaks after he was chosen as the Republicans' latest nominee for House speaker at a Republican caucus meeting at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, Oct. 24, 2023. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

WASHINGTON — A time honored slogan on pizza boxes throughout the northeast and elsewhere in the country is “you’ve tried the rest, now try the best.”

And that’s what the House Republican Conference will be asked to do as of about noon today, at least in terms of best chance of being elected.

After the failure of three previous speaker designees: House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., House Judiciary Chair Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, and House Majority Whip Tom Emmer, R-

Minn., the GOP conference last night chose Rep, Mike Johnson, R-La., to be its fourth, and hopefully last, nominee.

And this time many in the party believe he's popular enough to go all the way and actually win the gavel.

Johnson won a secret-ballot vote shortly after 10 p.m. Tuesday night, garnering 128 votes — the highest total of any designee so far — compared to 29 for Rep. Byron Donalds, R-Fla.

Forty-four Republicans voted for nominees not on the ballot, 43 of them throwing their support behind former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., whom they view as wrongly ousted as the result of a coup by the party's hard-right wing.

McCarthy is said to have floated a comeback of sorts prior to the vote, with his return as speaker and the elevation of Jordan as a kind of vice- or co-speaker. But that idea quickly fell by the wayside after Johnson's strong showing.

In a subsequent roll call vote on whether members would back Johnson on the floor, almost every Republican present voted yes, and none said they would vote against the nominee.

However, about 20 Republican members were absent at the time of the vote, and three — Reps. Mark Amodei, R-Nev., French Hill, R-Ark., and Thomas Massie, R-Ky. — voted “present.”

“Democracy is messy sometimes, but it is our system,” Johnson told reporters after Tuesday's late-night vote.

The good news, he said as he stood flanked by several smiling members of his conference, is that “this House Republican majority is united.”

“This group here is ready to govern and we are going to govern well,” he continued. “We're going to do what's right by the

people.”

In an immediate show of solidarity, Scalise put out a press release in which he said he was proud to support his fellow Louisianan.

“Mike is a strong leader who has the full support of our entire conference, and has a proven track record as a conservative leader who will fight for the American people against President Biden’s radical agenda that is crushing hard-working families,” Scalise said.

“Mike has already done a fantastic job serving as vice chairman of the House Republican Conference, and on the Judiciary Committee, he has been a key voice in our investigations holding the Biden administration accountable,” the majority leader continued.

“Mike is honest, hardworking, and principled — he is a great man and will make a great speaker,” Scalise said.

Wednesday afternoon’s vote on the speaker designee will come on the 22nd day the chamber has been without a leader and effectively paralyzed, unable to act on Biden’s request for aid for Israel and Ukraine, to finish its budget work, or pass what now appears to be a dearly needed continuing resolution to keep the government funded beyond Nov 17.

It follows an extraordinary day at the Longworth House Office Building on which Emmer secured the conference nomination, only to see it slip away four hours later in the face of intransigent opposition from GOP hardliners.

Johnson, a fourth-term member of the House, is the son of a Shreveport, Louisiana, firefighter who was badly injured on the job and left disabled.

Johnson went on to earn a pair of degrees from Louisiana State University and worked as a college professor, newspaper columnist, attorney and conservative talk radio show host before winning election to Congress.

Today, in addition to being speaker designee, Johnson is vice chair of the House Republican Conference and has seats on the Armed Services and Judiciary committees.

He is also the former chairman of the Republican Study Committee.

In terms of the political spectrum, Johnson is a solid social conservative, though less provocatively so than Jordan.

He served on former President Donald Trump's impeachment defense team, and reportedly played a central role in encouraging House Republicans to support Trump's seeking to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

More recently, Johnson sponsored legislation that would have barred the discussion of sexual orientation or gender identity at any school serving children under 10 years of age that receives federal funding.

He also opposes continued funding for the war in Ukraine, one of the issues that has sharply divided the conference.

During his brief appearance before reporters after last night's vote, Johnson was pressed about all of these issues.

When the subject turned to his efforts to overturn the election through procedural maneuvering on Jan. 6, 2021, the day of the siege on the U.S. Capitol by insurgents loyal to Trump, Johnson batted the question away.

“Next question,” he said as some of the Republicans standing with him booed the reporters who brought up the issue.

If Johnson doesn’t secure the 217 votes he needs to become the next speaker, moderate Republicans are expected to join Democrats in the chamber in a bid to expand the powers to Speaker Pro Tem Patrick McHenry, R-N.C., for some period of time yet to be determined to get the chamber back to work.

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