



What Kevin McCarthy Really Lost in Congress and the Corporate Executive Challenge He Now Faces

by Chitra Ragavan · 13 Jan 2023 · 6 min read

Firebrands in Congress used “radical candor” to communicate they don’t trust their leader and the institution. Like corporate bosses, McCarthy must now engage with the rebels.

Like many New Year’s resolutions, the one by House Republicans to unite, coalesce and teach Democrats a lesson on how to really govern [crumbled](#) on January 2, when Rep. Kevin McCarthy embarked on the first of 15 humiliating rounds of voting over four days to finally secure enough votes to become the speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives.

McCarthy’s epic [speaker-at-any-cost](#) battle came to a head when 20 ultra-conservative holdouts of the House Freedom Caucus, whom CNN [described](#) as a “very small minority

of a slim majority,” demonstrated ruthless gamesmanship to hold his lifelong dream hostage and revealed a truism in both the U.S. government and corporate America today: leaders can no longer rule by fiat.



House Speaker-Elect Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), during one of 15 failed votes

Like millions of employees who’ve had tough conversations with their bosses in the wake of the COVID pandemic, these GOP holdouts had some [brutal truths](#) for McCarthy.

In the tech world, where I am an executive coach and management consultant, we call this “radical candor.” In McCarthy’s case, “radical candor” cost him his job 15 times over. The question he now faces is how to make sure it doesn’t cost him his job one more time. And what I tell tech executives is what I’d tell McCarthy: engage but don’t abdicate.

In this instance, the ultra-conservative, “Never Kevin” faction resisted the traditional “Speaker-knows-best,” approach, demanding [greater decentralization](#) of power, a paring down Big Government, a [seat at the table](#), [realistic deadlines](#), transparency, accountability and, above all, like employees the world over, a leader they could trust

who had [earned their vote](#). “We have zero trust in him,” said Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-FL), in [announcing](#) up front that he would not be voting for McCarthy, and holding out until the bitter end, when he grudgingly changed his last-man-standing vote to “present.”



Kevin McCarthy confronts republican holdout Matt Gaetz (R-FL). Photo from C-Span.

The majority of the 20 holdouts came from largely safe districts (with the exception of Rep. Lauren Boebert (R-CO) who won by a [razor-thin margin](#)), giving them the power to flex their muscle, to the consternation of their more staid colleagues who find them capricious [rebels without a cause](#).

Dubbed by CNN news anchors as the “Mega-Maga Caucus” and “Chaos Caucus,” they are all loyalists of former president and 2024 candidate Donald Trump and had voted to reject the outcome of the 2020 presidential elections. Yet, their anti-establishment fire to burn the House down, so to speak, was perhaps best captured in three dramatic moments: the defeat of Trump’s endorsement of McCarthy [rejected](#) by a stalwart Trump supporter Gaetz; the equally [public rejection](#) of his call to Boebert; and the [image](#) of Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Green extending a phone to a holdout colleague, with

the initials “DT” on it, presumably to reference Donald Trump, which was also ignored.

The same rebellious trendline has also manifested over the past two years among the far-left progressive flank of the Democratic party. The difference in last week’s McCarthy brouhaha, as Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne pointed out, was far-left progressives showed an equally stubborn, [staunch unity](#) in backing Rep. Hakeem Jeffries (D-NY) for minority leader, demonstrating their willingness in this instance to be team players, even though they have in the past inflicted their [own brand of pain](#) on former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Ca) and other leaders.



Republican holdouts conferring between votes. Photo from The New York Times.

While we’re familiar with startup ventures in Silicon Valley, these new-age political influencers are acting like startup politicians, using the power of social media to bootstrap and crowdfund their audacious agendas, transforming American politics forever, for better or worse. The Wall Street Journal reported that roughly half of the

McCarthy holdouts have targeted [small online donors](#) via their newfound influencer status to connect with disaffected constituents. Those pooled micro-contributions – similar to tech crowdfunding – can be leveraged to resist the political arm-twisting from large donors and political action committees they [allege of being in bed with status quo leaders](#) like McCarthy.

The bitter negotiations taught McCarthy valuable [lessons in leadership](#), he told reporters Friday night. “Because it took this long, now we’ve learned how to govern. So now we’ll be able to get the job done,” McCarthy said. “At the end of the day, we’re going to be more effective, more efficient and definitely government is going to be more accountable.”

The freshly minted speaker may have little choice in that regard, as one of his most startling capitulations to the holdouts was agreeing to reinstate an obscure parliamentary rule called “[motion to vacate the chair](#),” which would basically [lower the boom](#) on his speakership if just one member of the House calls for his ouster, forcing a vote that would cost him his leadership.

In other words, McCarthy gave his political enemies one powerful weapon most private sector employees lack: getting rid of the boss.