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Matt Gaetz

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'He is hated': House Republicans secretly consider expelling Matt Gaetz after booting George Santos

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WASHINGTON – Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., continues to draw the ire of his Republican colleagues in the House weeks after he led the ouster of Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., from the speakership, and some of his detractors have privately floating expelling him from Congress.

Several Republican House members, many of whom are still angry at Gaetz for his antics that impeded McCarthy and the majority of the conference from passing legislation, have begun to discuss Gaetz's ongoing investigation by the House Ethics Committee in the wake of the expulsion of embattled former Rep. George Santos, R-N.Y.

Leading up to Santos' expulsion, multiple opponents of his removal publicly voiced their concerns about expelling a member who had not been convicted of a crime, which would overturn the precedent set by Congress in modern times.

One of those members was Gaetz himself, who openly defended Santos on the House floor.

“I rise not to defend George Santos whoever he is, but to defend the very precedent that my colleagues are willing to shatter,” Gaetz said last week.

One House Republican, who spoke to USA TODAY on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly about conversations between their colleagues, said GOP members were well aware of the future consequences of expelling Santos.

“There were a number of people who voted to expel Santos with the express intent of

thinking through the precedent there on what happens next,” the member said. “There was a lot of forethought about the precedent and what would happen when a report on Gaetz comes out.”

Gaetz led the handful of Republicans who voted to remove McCarthy from the top job in the House earlier this year. After the lawmakers voted with Democrats to boot McCarthy, it led to weeks of infighting in the fractured Republican conference to select another leader. Though lawmakers eventually rallied around now-Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., it used up weeks of time as lawmakers tried to reach a temporary agreement to avoid a government shutdown.

GOP lawmakers, the Republican said, are much more “excited” to expel Gaetz than Santos if the House Ethics Committee releases a report that is just as damning for Gaetz as it was for the Long Island Republican.

The House Ethics Committee is investigating various allegations against Gaetz, including accusations of sexual misconduct, illicit drug use and misuse of campaign funds. The committee has reached out to at least one witness in its investigation in a sign the panel is turning to Gaetz after concluding its investigation into Santos, CNN reported. The Justice Department investigated Gaetz over sex trafficking allegations but decided not to pursue charges against him in February.

The House Ethics Committee, a bipartisan panel evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats, has been criticized for being slow-moving and having limited options for punishment if it finds wrongdoing.

However, after Santos' expulsion following the committee's scathing report showing substantial evidence he broke federal law members had renewed hopes it could act swiftly and promptly to address congressional wrongdoing.

“One of the complaints that you often hear is that things often go to the ethics committee and it takes an extended period of time,” Rep. Michael Guest, R-Miss., chair of the committee, said last week. “I think that’s unfair for members of Congress and for members of this body.”

“It’s important that the ethics committee do their work, that they return their reports in a timely fashion,” so members could face the proper repercussions, Guest said.

Another House Republican who spoke to USA TODAY on the condition of anonymity to

speak about the conference's attitude towards Gaetz, said members are waiting for any ethics report on Gaetz to be released before publicly calling for his ouster.

"If there's anything in there that's bad, I can guarantee people will have their fangs out. He is hated in our conference," the House Republican said. "If he comes back as guilty in this ethics thing, I think he's in trouble."

In a recent closed-door conference meeting, the Republican recalled, Gaetz stood up to speak but was yelled at by members "to sit down and shut up," reflecting the animosity GOP lawmakers still harbor for Gaetz.

But other Republicans are raising concerns their peers may be weaponizing the ethics committee against members with whom they may just have political disagreements.

Rep. Dave Joyce, R-Ohio, a member of the House Ethics Committee who led the investigation into Santos, declined to comment about the investigation into Gaetz but told USA TODAY that "every case is independent of one another" and cautioned against linking the inquiries into the two lawmakers.

Rep. Mike Lawler, R-N.Y., who has openly criticized Gaetz over his politics, also warned against using the committee as a "political weapon or a bludgeon against somebody just because you don't like them."

Other GOP members are trying to strike a middle ground between immediately pushing for Gaetz's ouster to avoid predetermining judgment and leaving the door open to expelling Gaetz if the ethics committee comes out with damning findings.

Two other House Republicans said lawmakers would take a serious and thorough look at the committee's report on Gaetz when it is released and make their determination of what they consider a proper punishment then.

When asked by USA TODAY about his thoughts on members' call to expel him over his ousting of McCarthy, Gaetz, who has taken the vitriol his colleagues have thrown at him in stride, smiled: "Which members?"