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House Speaker Mike Johnson's honeymoon period is over. Congress is still bracing for fights.

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USA TODAY

Published 5:17 a.m. ET Dec. 4, 2023 | Updated 4:08 p.m. ET Dec. 4, 2023

WASHINGTON – Some of the House of Representatives' most conservative lawmakers are warning that newly elected Speaker Mike Johnson's grace period is over.

As Congress braces for a battle to avoid a government shutdown and approve crucial legislation such as an annual defense policy bill, the Louisiana Republican's initial weeks in office, which some members have likened to a honeymoon, are coming to a close.

Johnson's relationship with the conference's hard-right wing is now "like any marriage or any relationship," Rep. Andy Ogles, R-Tenn., a member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, told USA TODAY.

"You have to build trust. You have to have expectations set and expectations met. And that's now the phase we're going into with the new speaker," Ogles said. He noted that Johnson is "a friend" but that there are "high expectations" for him.

Some conservative hard-liners, such as Rep. Troy Nehls, R-Texas, agreed Johnson is entering a new phase as a leader. But the Texas lawmaker still hoped Johnson could be given more grace, calling the House "a mess" and lamenting that there are "Republicans that won't negotiate."

Johnson's election as speaker was widely celebrated among the House's right flank for the previously little-known Louisiana Republican's more conservative credentials when compared with his predecessor, former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif.

But Johnson's new role in Congress as one of the four party leaders, referred to as the four corners, along with House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y.; Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.; and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., has required him to represent all House Republicans, not just the conservative ones. That applies to delicate negotiations, such as efforts to avoid a partial government shutdown that could begin in January.

"He's been more busy negotiating four-corner deals than talking with his conference," said Texas Rep. Chip Roy, another member of the Freedom Caucus. He derided such talks as "swamp-negotiated."

A spokesperson for Johnson told USA TODAY that "Speaker Johnson is as committed to enacting conservative reforms as the day he was unanimously elected."

Johnson, the spokesperson said, is focused on addressing the migrant crisis at the southern border, cutting back on federal spending and proceeding with House Republicans' impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden.

Fragile negotiations

Regardless of conservative hesitation to negotiate with Democrats, chair of the Freedom Caucus, Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., has signaled conservatives are willing to accept a spending agreement larger than some of their original demands. Those included deep cuts to the government.

Some Republicans have for months pressed for funding levels below what between Biden and McCarthy originally agreed on in the summer's debt ceiling deal to avert a default. That deal included a spending cap of \$1.59 trillion for the next fiscal year, but conservatives have been demanding a lower top line of \$1.47 trillion.

Last week, however, the Freedom Caucus appeared to back down.

"1.59 is too expensive for many of us but we realize that 1.47 is not going to happen," Perry said at a news conference. "It is too much, but that has to be the limit."

Their concession is a small victory for Johnson, considering McCarthy was ousted by conservatives in part because of their demands for significant spending cuts. The Republican rebels who voted to remove McCarthy also balked at his negotiations with

Democrats, the very step Johnson may need to take to keep the government's doors open next year.

Parts of the government are now funded until Jan. 19, and the remaining functions are funded until Feb. 2.

'He's got a tough situation'

Nevertheless, most House Republicans have acknowledged Johnson's still relatively new position as speaker, considered one of the toughest jobs in Washington, is only made more difficult because of his circumstances.

"Speaker Johnson has been thrown into one of the toughest jobs in the world – in one of the most toxic environments our country has faced in modern history," Rep. Debbie Lesko, R-Ariz., told USA TODAY in a statement, adding that he has "gone about his work with positivity, integrity, and commitment to the future of America."

For Johnson's part, the recently installed speaker has been pressing the Senate to pass as much of House Republicans' sweeping border plan – referred to as H.R. 2 – in conjunction with continued U.S. assistance to Ukraine. Congress has been working on passing a wide-ranging foreign aid package with border policy tacked on for weeks as Ukraine's war with Russia continues and Israel's war rages on with Hamas.

Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Mont., one of the handful of GOP members who voted to oust McCarthy, dismissed the notion Johnson had a grace period in the first place and said he was evaluating his job performance day by day.

"I don't think there was any such thing (as a grace period). I think you bring people in and see if they can do the job they were brought in to do," Rosendale said.

Another conservative, Rep. Warren Davidson, R-Ohio, acknowledged that Johnson is in a "tough situation" but said conservative grievances against him are nothing "personal."

"He's got a tough situation. None of it's personal, we're just trying to make sure we deliver on the promises we made to the American people," Davidson said. "I'm surrendering with nobody."