

# McCarthy wins first round of debt ceiling battle

**Lisa Mescaro and Kevin Freking**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Speaker Kevin McCarthy surprised Washington when he showed he could unite the House's raucous Republican majority to pass a sweeping package to raise the nation's debt limit by \$1.5 trillion in exchange for steep spending reductions, an opening bid awaiting President Joe Biden's response.

The next moves are more difficult, and politically uncertain.

This week's stunning turnaround for the battle-hardened Republican speaker is only act one in what is expected to be a long summer battle with Democrats to find agreement to lift the nation's borrowing capacity and avert a potentially catastrophic debt default.

Biden on Thursday had no direct response to McCarthy's maneuver. The White House has made clear it is not willing to barter with Republicans over whether or not the nation will pay its bills. Democrats opposed the harsh spending cuts Republicans proposed, and the president vowed to veto McCarthy's bill.

"We're not negotiating on this," said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

The president has indi-

cated he's willing to talk budget issues, she said. But he's not engaging on whether or not the nation will raise the debt limit.

The U.S. is not a "dead-beat nation" and always pays its debt, she said. "House Republicans are holding our economy hostage and threatening default."

What has become apparent, though, is that Biden's refusal to negotiate may not be a tenable position for the White House as the deadline nears for action. While the White House is taking the long view, preparing to slam the Republicans for what Biden calls "wacko" ideas that will harm Americans, at some point the president, and the Democratic-led Senate, will need to respond to the House.

Economic analysts warn even the political threat of a federal default on the nation's debt, now at \$31 trillion, would send shockwaves through an already jittery economy. With economic growth falling to a sluggish 1 percent annual rate last quarter, according to new data this week, signs point to the potential for a recession ahead.

The Treasury Department continues to pay the nation's bills, but the money will soon fall short, even though tax returns in April helped replenish the coffers. An analysis from Goldman Sachs puts the



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE / ASSOCIATED PRESS

**Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., talks to reporters at the Capitol in Washington, D.C., after the Republican majority in the House passed a debt ceiling package on Wednesday, April 26, 2023.**

deadline for raising the debt limit in late July.

"We've lifted the debt limit. We've sent it to the Senate. We've done our job," McCarthy said after Wednesday's vote.

McCarthy said the president "should sit down and negotiate."

Underestimated from the start, McCarthy of California has shown he can muscle legislation to passage using the currency Washington values most — votes — to lay down a policy marker in the debate.

The Republican-passed bill is stacked with party priorities, and imposes broad restrictions on federal government spending that are bound to be unpopular as they chip away at the programs and services Americans rely on in their

daily lives. And the bill's bolstered work requirements on recipients of food stamps, health care and other government aid are expected to fall harshly on Americans who need aid the most. The demands are likely to be met with protests.

In the Senate, where Democrats have the majority, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer calls the House package a "ransom note forced on us by the hard right."

Schumer may never even bring the House bill up for a vote in the Senate. Instead, he predicted Americans "will reject steep cuts to education, law enforcement, veterans care and border security" contained in the Republican bill.

Biden and his Democratic

allies in Congress want to simply raise the debt limit with no strings attached, a throwback to an earlier era.

But those days may be long passed. Democrats negotiated their own priorities to raise the debt limit during the Trump presidency.

And Republicans showed they were willing to take the country to the brink of a first-ever federal default the last time they confronted a Democratic president, during the tea party era a decade ago.

McCarthy found success in uniting the Freedom Caucus and other factions around this proposal, but next steps will be more complicated for the Republican speaker.

The package the Republicans approved, over unified Democratic opposition in the House, included many of the Freedom Caucus priorities.

Rank-and-file Republicans know it has little chance of becoming law and was merely an opening salvo to push Biden to the negotiating table. Any compromise may be harder for McCarthy to sell.

"We're sending over what we believe is a responsible solution," said Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas. "Now, it's your move, Mr. President."

Like past Republican leaders John Boehner and Paul Ryan, McCarthy risks being chased to early retire-

ment or facing the threat of a vote for his ouster if he doesn't push hard-right priorities.

For now, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell is staying out of McCarthy's way, letting the new Republican speaker try his hand at uniting his conference and confronting the Democratic president where others have failed.

"Getting something like that across the finish line in a narrowly divided House is a remarkable achievement," said Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., the No. 2 Republican. He called it "a tour de force."

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said the House's ability to pass their bill "changes the dynamics considerably."

People should not expect McConnell to step in and help broker a debt ceiling agreement.

"It's not going to happen," Cornyn said.

"The whole purpose of this is to compel the president to negotiate and to demonstrate to Washington D.C that Kevin McCarthy has the votes to raise the debt ceiling," said one McCarthy ally, Rep. French Hill, R-Ark. "The game moves to the White House to see what they are willing to do."

Associated Press writers **Chris Megerian** and **Josh Boak** contributed to this report.

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## 31 drug crime sentences commuted by president

**Colleen Long**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON, D.C. — President Joe Biden has commuted the sentences of 31 people convicted of non-violent drug crimes who were serving time in home confinement, the White House announced Friday.

Many would have gotten a lower sentence if they were charged today with the same offense because of changes in the laws. A commuted sentence means they'll spend less time in home confinement.

The commutations came as the White House announced a set of policy actions across 20 different agencies meant to improve the criminal justice system, which disproportionately affects Black and other non-white communities. The president announced his reelection campaign this week, and must keep Black voters in his coalition if he wants to win in 2024.

The plan is an effort to expand health care access, affordable housing and education, and make it easier for those who have been mixed up in the system to get jobs, higher education and vote. The effort includes a plan to make more

grants available for people who need funding for education, and small business loans.

Those whose sentences were commuted included men and women convicted of drug possession in Iowa, Indiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Hawaii and Texas, and they will all finish serving time June 30. If any are in prison, they will finish out their terms in home confinement, and won't have to pay the rest of their fines which range from \$5,000 to \$20,000.

Roughly 600,000 U.S. residents leave prison each year, and another 9 million cycle in and out of jail. As many as one in three Americans has a criminal record. That stigma can make it hard to get a job, go back to school or start a business.

"Far too many of them face steep barriers to getting a job or a home, obtaining health care, or finding the capital to start a business," said outgoing domestic policy adviser Susan Rice, the first person to hold both national security and domestic policy adviser positions in the White House. She is leaving her post after two years and her last day is May 26.

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