

Jim Jordan's pressure campaign is backfiring

Julian Zelizer's CNN Op-ed, October 19, 2023

Congressman Jim Jordan's plan to win the House speakership is not working.

Over the past few days, Jordan has tried to pressure fellow Republicans into voting for him. He mounted an intense campaign over the weekend to whip up the vote and undermine support for Louisiana Republican Steve Scalise.

On Tuesday, he called for a roll call vote. Knowing that he wouldn't win on round one, Jordan hoped to bully his opponents into a yes vote. As voters saw the roll call, he could then count on pressure mounting within the districts.

But momentum moved in the wrong direction. On Wednesday's vote, fewer Republicans were willing to support him. And some expressed their anger with his tactics. Arkansas Republican Steve Womack decried the "attack, attack, attack" methods that Jordan has been using. "And it has not helped one iota," Womack said, "That won't work with us."

The question is what has gone wrong? Intimidation, bullying and political pressure certainly can work. Just look at the Republican who is by far and away the leading contender in the race to become the nominee for his party in 2024, former President Donald Trump.

It is not a mystery that Trump has built an entire career on the power of intimidation. If you are against him, he will put all his effort in destroying you. If you stand in his way, he rallies his supporters to make it clear that you will not survive being his opponent.

A victory for Jordan would seem to make perfect sense in the era of Trump. Jordan is as MAGA as they come. Indeed, he was doing MAGA along with the Tea Party long before Trump came to town. He has been a staunch opponent of reproductive rights, a fervent believer in radical deregulation, a climate change denier, a culture wars soldier, and anything goes politician who believes government shutdowns are just part of the normal price of business.

Once Trump was president, Jordan was all in as a staunch defender – the partisan in chief – who would do anything to protect his party. And when it came to the 2020 election denialism, nobody did it better than Jordan. He spews conspiracy theory with the ease that many men his age talk about the latest NFL scores.

But Trump's bullying method is not failsafe. The most important challenge for Jordan is that he does not generate the same level of fear. Although he is a regular on Fox News, Jordan has not proven his ability to whip up the vote or to build broad coalitions. As an elected official profoundly uninterested in legislating, he has spent very little time rounding up support. Most of his notoriety has come from being on television, whether on interviews or in the committee room, making outrageous statements and repeating partisan

talking points. The skills that come from legislating, which forces members to build support among colleagues and secure their backing, has not been part of his repertoire.

His well-known reputation as a “legislative terrorist,” as former Speaker John Boehner has called him, scared Republicans as they look at the possibility of losing their House majority in 2024.

It is not that his tactics are unacceptable, after all the Party of Newt Gingrich and the Tea Party is more than comfortable burning down the House but placing Jordan at the top of the ticket – with Democrats licking their chops to connect the GOP to him as the titular head – could easily cost them a majority.

The swing districts in New York, for instance, would very likely go back to blue. The party needs someone who at least *appears* more reasonable – such as the temporary Speaker Patrick McHenry – so that they have a serious chance of keeping power. In a party that privileges partisan power above all else, Jordan is too high a cost. The same partisan imperative that has allowed someone like him to thrive in a major party is now a roadblock to his success.

Furthermore, the wrestling scandal that continues to swirl about him is not insignificant for the same reason. Six former wrestlers at Ohio State University, where he once coached, went public in 2018 with allegations he had dismissed their complaints of a doctor who was sexually molesting them. Jordan has emphatically denied their claims.

While many Republicans consider Jordan to be a useful attack dog for the party, he hasn't sold the entire caucus that he is the best leader for the party.

Finally, even in the most bitter and contentious of parties, personal relations still matter. Within the GOP, Jordan has not been a figure who is well loved. While Democrats see him as an existential danger to the health of the democracy, many Republicans don't see him as the kind of person who could be trusted or counted on. At a potential turning point moment for the party, Jordan doesn't have many chits he can call in to round up the votes.

To be sure, Jordan might still pull off a miracle. Given the instability and uncertainty surrounding the Speaker's contest – which is taking place at a moment of heightened tension and danger around the globe – anything can happen.

Even Republicans who are more than comfortable with the radicalization of their party realize that putting Jordan at the very top would be a tipping point for the GOP. There would be no way to escape the perception that the party was 100% Trumpist, and that Trump is merely a product of a bigger party ethos. The notion of any other path forward would be closed off.

Keeping Jordan out of the speakership at least creates the impression that change is possible – a necessary selling point to independent voters. Voting for Jordan to become the speaker is saying the silent part out loud. For now, there are still a few in the GOP who want to keep that reality quiet.

“One thing I cannot stomach or support is a bully,” said Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeks, R-Iowa, who voted against Jordan on the second ballot, adding that she received “credible death threats and a barrage of threatening calls.”