

Far Right Politicians Become a Power in the U.S. Congress

January 9, 2023



A Klan march in Washington, D.C. in 1925.

The far right has for the first time in a hundred years established itself as a force in the U.S. Congress. A group of just ten percent of the Republicans in Congress now has the power to disrupt and paralyze the lower house. The last time a group with links to violent organizations and activities has had such power was the early twentieth century when several Ku Klux Klan members sat in Congress.

Twenty far-right Republicans paralyzed the U.S. Congress for five days by refusing to support Republican leader Kevin McCarthy—himself quite reactionary—as Speaker of the House, thus denying him a majority of House members. Without a speaker, the House was unable to do anything: It couldn't seat new members, establish committees, or pass legislation. The impasse ended on January 6 when on the fifteenth round of voting McCarthy made several more concessions to the rightwing bloc giving them disproportionate power.

All of McCarthy's Republican opponents have extreme rightwing records. Today they form the legislative stormtroopers of former president Donald Trump who, as the House's investigation proved, led the attempted violent insurrection in January 2021. Several of the twenty were involved from Congress in supporting the legislative aspect of the coup. Twelve of them support former president Donald's Trump's false claims, denying the results of the 2020 presidential election that was won by President Joe Biden. Fifteen of them voted to overturn the Electoral College results of the 2020 election. Seventeen of them were endorsed by Trump. Nineteen of them are members of the ultra-right House Freedom Caucus (to which about 20 percent of all Republican representatives belong). A couple of them have spoken before white nationalist organizations. Now these twenty out of 434 representatives hold key levers of power.

McCarthy conceded to his opponents effective control of several congressional committees, though they don't have a majority. And he gave them the power to call to overturn the speaker at any time. The rightwing bloc will now be able to paralyze such essential legislative processes as the passage of the federal budget and the setting of the limits of the federal debt.

Other rightwing groups have had an influence on Congress in the past. From the 1950s to today, the John Birch Society, a far right, anti-Communist group, has had thousands of members and a significant influence in the Republican Party. Larry McDonald, a U.S. Representative from Georgia was elected the national leader of the John Birch society in 1983, though he died that same year in an airplane crash. In the 1950 and 60s, many conservative Republican leaders criticized the Birch society for its extremism.

The last time the United States saw violent, rightist politicians in Congress was in the heyday of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s to the 1940s. The Klan of the 1920s was not only anti-Black, but also anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish. The Klan was involved in violent attacks on Black people, including lynchings, it also became a force in the Democratic Party. Several Klan members or fellow travelers were elected as Democrats to the U.S. Senate, the U.S. House, to governorships, and to state and local offices

Some 11 Klansmen elected to the U.S. Senate, while five others were supported by the Klan. The Klan also elected several U.S. representatives and six governors in this period. Most of these Klan politicians came from the Deep South, but others were senators or governors from Oklahoma, Colorado, and Oregon. During the 1960s, while Klansmen terrorized the Black civil rights movement, Klan legislators worked to block civil rights legislation but they failed, beginning in 1964. Some of them remained members of Congress into the 1980s.

Today's rightwing movement is even larger and more widespread than the Klan was. We will have to resist this danger on the right everywhere.