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POLITICS

House Speaker Mike Johnson wants Ethics panel to keep Matt Gaetz report secret

By Caitlin Yilek

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Washington — House Speaker Mike Johnson said Friday that he would "strongly request" that the House Ethics Committee withhold a potentially damaging report on its investigation into whether former Rep. Matt Gaetz engaged in sexual misconduct, illicit drug use and bribery.

Gaetz resigned from Congress on Wednesday after President-elect Donald Trump announced he intended to nominate the Florida Republican as attorney general. The timing came days before a House panel was set to vote on releasing a

report on the allegations against Gaetz. The House Ethics Committee planned to take its vote Friday but canceled late Thursday.

Gaetz was also the subject of a previous Justice Department investigation that sought to determine if he violated sex trafficking and obstruction of justice laws. No charges were filed, and Gaetz has denied any wrongdoing.

"The rules of the House have always been that a former member is beyond the jurisdiction of the Ethics Committee," Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, told reporters.

Johnson said releasing the report would set a "terrible precedent" and "open up Pandora's box."

"I believe it is very important to maintain the house's tradition of not issuing ethics reports on people who are no longer members of Congress," he said. "The House Ethics Committee's jurisdiction is over sitting members of Congress. That's

Democratic Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, has called on the House panel to share the report and "all relevant documentation" on Gaetz with his committee. The Senate Judiciary Committee is responsible for conducting confirmation hearings for the attorney general nominee.

"The sequence and timing of Mr. Gaetz's resignation from the House raises serious questions about the contents of the House Ethics Committee report," Durbin said in a statement Thursday. "We cannot allow this valuable information

from a bipartisan investigation to be hidden from the American people. Make no mistake: this information could be relevant to the question of Mr. Gaetz's confirmation as the next attorney general of the United States and our constitutional responsibility of advice and consent."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee, also said he wants to see the report. Republican Sen. Mike Rounds of South Dakota isn't on the Judiciary Committee but said in an interview on CNN, "We should be able to get a hold of [the report], and we should have access to it one way or another, based on the way we do all of these nominations."

A spokesperson for Durbin responded to Johnson's remarks in a statement Friday that argued there is "longstanding precedent" in both chambers for releasing ethics investigation materials after a member resigns.

"The now former Congressman shouldn't be able to resign away an ethics investigation involving allegations of grave misconduct, especially when he will be nominated to be our country's top law enforcement officer. There is bipartisan support for the Senate Judiciary Committee having access to this information," Durbin spokesperson Josh Sorbe said.

Jaala Brown and [Cristina Corujo](#) contributed to this report.

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Caitlin Yilek

Caitlin Yilek is a politics reporter at CBSNews.com, based in Washington, D.C. She previously worked for the Washington Examiner and The Hill, and was a member of the...

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Matt Gaetz

The House speaker will “strongly” urge his GOP ethics chair to shutter investigation without letting Senate see files.

November 15, 2024

By [Meryl Kornfield](#), [Marianna Sotomayor](#) and [Paul Kane](#)

Speaker Mike Johnson (R-Louisiana) said Friday that he will urge the House Ethics Committee to suppress its report into former congressman Matt Gaetz (R-Florida) and block the Senate Judiciary Committee from viewing the investigation, an unusual intervention that could shape a divisive nomination fight.

“I’m going to strongly request the Ethics Committee not issue the report because that is not the way we do things in the House, and I think that would be a terrible precedent,” Johnson told reporters midday Friday.

Pressed again on whether he would stop it from coming out publicly or from going to the Judiciary Committee for consideration of Gaetz’s nomination, Johnson said, “I’m going to request that it not be.”

The committee was looking into allegations that Gaetz, now President-elect Donald Trump’s pick to run the Justice Department, engaged in sexual misconduct and illegal drug use and accepted improper gifts while a member of Congress.

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The comments marked a stunning reversal for Johnson, who just Thursday [told](#) Fox News that the speaker’s role is not to get “involved in what happens in Ethics. Lots of important reasons for that.”

Johnson told reporters Friday that he had not yet reached the Ethics chair, Rep. Michael Guest (R-Mississippi), in part because the speaker spent Thursday night in Palm Beach, Florida, with Trump, who is already testing Republicans' loyalty with controversial nominees such as Gaetz.

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But the House and Senate Ethics committees have in the past released investigative reports or summaries, or shared their materials with other investigative bodies such as the Justice Department or congressional committees.

"That's the precedent. That's the history, as I understand it. So, I think that's a larger discussion," Rep. Mark DeSaulnier (D-California), a member of the Ethics Committee, said early Friday before Johnson's comments.

Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-California), who served seven years on the committee before she joined party leadership, concurred that the committee can do what it wants with the findings.

"The investigation would stop. Whether the report would stop is another thing. That's up to the committee. I think they should release it," the former speaker told reporters Friday.

Johnson's about-face is significant because several Senate Judiciary Committee Republicans have publicly asked for the House Ethics panel to release its report — or at least transmit it privately to the committee — so they can adequately prepare to question Gaetz in a confirmation hearing once he is formally nominated to serve as attorney general next year.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Texas), who has served decades on the Judiciary Committee, told reporters Thursday that he would "absolutely" like to have access to the report's findings.

"I don't see any relevant information should be withheld," Cornyn said. "We also have the resources of the FBI to do a background investigation as well. So one way or the other, as you know around here, facts ultimately come out."

House speakers, as well as other lawmakers, have in the past suggested the Ethics Committee begin investigations into potentially unethical members, but intervening at the conclusion of an investigation — into someone seeking to be the nation's chief law enforcement officer — has no modern precedent.

It's unclear whether the Senate Judiciary Committee would be able to access the report if the House refuses to make it available. But at least one senator said Friday he still expected to obtain it. "We should be able to get a hold of it, and we should be able to have access to it one way or another," Sen. Mike Rounds (R-South Dakota) said on CNN after Johnson's comments.

Johnson declared to reporters that sometime Friday he would be likely to call Guest — or "anybody else" who will listen — a departure from norms.

About 90 minutes after his first remarks, Johnson tried to claim that nothing had changed. "I'm not involved with the investigation; nothing has changed. I'm not involved in the ethics investigation," he said.

Johnson said that he was “merely commenting” on news media reports and that he wanted to uphold tradition.

Asked again whether senators should review the Gaetz material, Johnson demurred.

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Back in 2006, despite the immediate resignation of a Florida congressman caught up in a scandal, the House Ethics Committee went ahead with an investigation into the ex-lawmaker’s relationship with House pages and released a detailed report two months later.

In 2011, after a Republican from Nevada resigned rather than sit for an interview, the Senate Ethics Committee voted unanimously to release its 75-page report and forwarded its materials to the Justice Department, asking for a criminal investigation.

The Ethics Committee prides itself in operating quietly and independently given its investigative nature, though it has not been safe from the waves of polarization that have affected the House in recent years — and the Gaetz episode is its most recent test.

The committee — five Republicans and five Democrats — had planned to meet Friday to vote on whether to release the report on Gaetz this week, but it abruptly canceled the meeting Thursday evening. It is unclear whether it has been rescheduled, or whether members would even discuss releasing the report.

“That’s to be determined. There’s a mystery within the mystery,” DeSaulnier said.

What readers are saying

The comments express strong frustration and suspicion regarding the suppression of an ethics report on Matt Gaetz. Many commenters demand transparency and the release of the report, suspecting significant wrongdoing and cover-up efforts by high-ranking officials. There is a call... [Show more](#)

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