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Opinion | Nancy Mace: Why The Republican House Isn't Working

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Credit...Daniel Terna for The New York Times

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By Nancy Mace

Ms. Mace, a Republican, represents South Carolina's First Congressional District in the U.S. House.

- Dec. 8, 2025

I came to Congress five years ago believing I could make a difference for my constituents, for South Carolina and for a country I love deeply. I was the first woman to graduate from the Citadel's Corps of Cadets. I don't scare easily.

But I've learned that the system in the House promotes control by party leaders over accountability and achievement. No one can be held responsible for inaction, so far too little gets done. The obstacles to achieving almost anything are enough to make any member who came to Washington with noble intentions ask: Why am I even here?

The House's problems didn't start with this Congress. They've been building for decades. The current leadership has failed to reverse it — and in some ways deepened it.

Image



Credit...Haiyun Jiang for The New York Times

A small number of lawmakers negotiate major legislation behind closed doors and spring it on members with little notice or

opportunity for input. Leadership promises members their provisions will be in a bill, then strips them out in final drafts. Every must-pass bill is loaded with thousands of pages of unrelated policies, presented as take-it-or-leave-it. The House has abdicated control of appropriations, which the Constitution says must originate here, to the Senate.

For much of our history, most House business was conducted under an open rule: Any member could offer any germane amendment. Over the last two decades, both parties have moved to closed and structured rules, in which no amendments or only handpicked amendments are allowed votes. The House has not considered a single open rule since 2016. Leaders of both parties have systematically silenced rank-and-file voices.

Consider some issues on which Americans have made up their minds. Banning congressional stock trading: Eighty-six percent of voters are in favor. Term limits: Eighty-seven percent of adults support them. Voter ID: Seventy-six percent of people support requirements. These are bipartisan supermajority positions. The House cannot hold a simple up-or-down vote on any of them.

Rank-and-file lawmakers can still use discharge petitions to force action on bills leadership won't schedule. If 218 members sign one, a bill must come to the floor. We used this tool to pass a bill ordering the Department of Justice to release the Epstein files. I signed another discharge petition that would force a vote on a bill to ban congressional stock trading. Nearly every colleague claims to support this policy — in town halls, in local papers, on cable news. But when asked to sign that petition, they vanish rather than upset House leadership.

Would opening up the floor lead to more conservative bills passing or more bipartisan ones? The honest answer is it would do both. Only about 5 percent of the bills introduced this year have seen a floor vote. Some Republican priorities would finally get a vote. So, too, would common-sense bipartisan measures. The point is to do more and let voters see where their representatives stand. What we have now is the worst of all worlds: little accountability, transparency and results.

Here's a hard truth Republicans don't want to hear: Nancy Pelosi was a more effective House speaker than any Republican this century. I agree with her on essentially nothing. But she understood something we don't: No majority is permanent. When Democrats

hold the majority, they ram through the most progressive policies they can. They deliver for the coalition that elected them while they are in power.

Republicans do the opposite. We get the majority, then become petrified of losing it. We pass the most moderate policies we can pressure conservatives to accept, betraying the coalition that delivered us here. Ms. Pelosi was ruthless, but she got things done. The current House is restrictive and ineffective, control with barely any results. Republican leadership seems intent on replicating her model of consolidation without her bold vision to push through the policies that won us the majority.

Speaker Mike Johnson is better than his predecessor. But the frustrations of being a rank-and-file House member are compounded as certain individuals or groups remain marginalized within the party, getting little say. Women will never be taken seriously until leadership decides to take us seriously, and I'm no longer holding my breath. Since 2013, the Republican conference chair position has gone to a woman. It's the token slot, the designated leadership role for the top woman in the conference, while the real power lies in other offices.

I'm sure Lisa McClain, the current chair of the House Republican Conference, is a [wonderful cook](#). I'd wager she's an even better legislator. But we'll never know, because that's not the box she's been assigned.

Today Republicans have a governing trifecta: the House, the Senate and the White House. If we fail to pass legislation that permanently secures the border, addresses the affordability crisis, improves health care and restores law and order, we will lose this majority. And we will deserve it.

We can do better. We can restore regular order, empower members to legislate and deliver on our promises. But that will require a fundamental shift, one that prioritizes courage over control. Let us vote. Let the people see. Let the chips fall. That's democracy.

A version of this article appears in print on Dec. 10, 2025, Section A, Page 19 of the New York edition with the headline: What's the Point of My Being in Congress?. [Order Reprints](#) | [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

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