US lawmakers resume globe trotting paid by special interests

BILLY HOUSE (((Bloomberg))) News Mar 21, 2023 0

On March 19, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy urged Americans not to protest in the event of former President Donald Trump's arrest this week.

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WASHINGTON — Members of Congress and their staffers rebounded from pandemic travel anxiety in 2022, accepting more than $6.6 million worth of airline tickets, hotel rooms and meals paid for by special-interest groups.

The total of 1,785 trips that were paid for by outside organizations last year was up from 829 trips in 2021, and 321 in 2020, when travel was limited by coronavirus restrictions, according to a database of disclosures compiled by the nonpartisan data service LegiStorm LLC.

Destinations included more than 40 foreign countries, including Israel, Spain and Japan, as well as U.S. cities such as Las Vegas, New Orleans and Miami.

Then-Israeli Prime Minister (((Naftali Bennett))) meets with an (((AIPAC)))-organized delegation of Republican members of the U.S. Congress, led by House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, on Feb. 21, 2022, in Jerusalem.

Amos Ben Gershom, Israel Gpo

Picking up the tab for lawmakers and members of their staffs were some of the most active lobbying groups in Washington, like the Motion Picture Association Inc., the American Gaming Association, the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association and a charitable organization affiliated with the American Israel Public Affairs Committee.

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Some of the lawmakers took spouses and other family members, also free-of-cost, on the excursions. Kevin McCarthy, now the House speaker, brought his mother along on an all-expenses-paid trip to Israel.

"Privately sponsored travel for members of Congress is one of the most effective tools of influence-peddling by businesses and special interest groups," Craig Holman, a lobbyist for Public Citizen, a nonpartisan group that emphasizes government accountability. "It is noteworthy that these trips are almost always to ideal vacation spots and not to troubled lands, such as Ukraine."

The trips are separate from taxpayer-paid congressional delegation travel, typically taken overseas and involve military transportation.

The $26,847 tab for McCarthy and his mother, Roberta McCarthy, was picked up by the (((AIPAC)))-affiliated American Israel Education Foundation. The foundation also paid $13,805 for current House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries of New York to participate in all-Democratic delegation trip to Israel at about the same time (the Republicans had their own).

McCarthy didn't respond to a request for comment. But in his application for the trip to the House Ethics Committee, he described it as an "educational trip to meet officials and representatives to get updates and better understand the current geopolitical, economic, and regional challenges in this important area, and their effect on our national security."

Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., speaks at the California GOP Organizing Convention on Saturday in Sacramento, Calif.

Juliana Yamada, San Francisco Chronicle via AP

The trip included VIP treatment at the airport, luxury hotel stays on the Sea of Galilee and guided visits to ancient sites. The itinerary took them to Israel's borders with the Gaza Strip and Lebanon, a stop at an Iron Dome anti-missile system battery, and an opportunity to go inside a so-called Hezbollah terror tunnel. There were also audiences with Israeli leaders.

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Israel was by far the top destination for the free travel, by dollars — no doubt a reflection of the nation's role as a crucial ally in the Middle East and a top recipient of American aid. Shoring up support in Washington has grown more important as criticism mounts over Israeli treatment of Palestinians and its move away from a two-state peace plan.

The sponsored travel is legal and each trip has to be submitted for advance approval from the ethics panel of the lawmaker's chamber to be sure it meets the rules Congress sets for itself. But critics say those rules should be stricter and that the trip sponsors are buying the lawmakers' time and attention in ways the average person cannot.

The most frequent international destinations for Republicans were Israel, Egypt, Spain, Japan and Kenya. Tops for Democrats were Israel, the U.K., Japan, Iceland and Belgium. Overseas trips were paid for by a variety of policy institutes, universities and educational foundations, such as the United Nations Foundation, the Korea Society, the nonpartisan Aspen Institute, the Conservative Climate Foundation Inc., and the Ripon Society, a Republican policy group.

Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb.

House Television via AP

Rep. Don Bacon, a Nebraska Republican. racked up the most travel, dollar-wise, reporting $80,610 worth of sponsored trips. His three excursions included one to Madrid last November with his wife, Angie, for a "TransAtlantic Capital to Capital Exchange," attended by other lawmakers. He also went to Israel with his son, a visit paid for by the American Israel Education Foundation.

"These trips are approved by House Ethics, follow all guidelines, and didn't cost the taxpayers a dime," Bacon said in a statement. "They provided an opportunity to expand my knowledge on issues by seeing things first-hand as well as strengthen diplomatic ties with our allies."

"I appreciate the opportunity to bring along one family member when approved by the Ethics Committee," he added.

Democratic Rep. Lou Correa of California is pictured during a House impeachment inquiry hearing on December 9, 2019, in Washington, DC.

Doug Mills, Getty Images

Rep. Lou Correa, a California Democrat, reported the single most expensive privately funded trip, to Israel. Joined by his wife, Esther, the trip's cost was listed as $46,713 and paid for by the U.S. Israel Education Association.

In all, Correa reported $58,315 worth of travel in four trips — including one to Reykjavik, Iceland, again with his wife, focused on agriculture and trade and funded by the Aspen Institute Inc. Congressional Program. The couple also traveled to Las Vegas so he could participate in discussions on emerging technology policies, a trip paid by the Consumer Technology Association whose members include Apple Inc., Verizon Communications Inc. and Amazon.com Services Inc.

He didn't respond to a request for comment.

In the Senate, the number of privately paid-for trips was generally lower. Sen. Susan Collins, a Maine Republican, is listed as taking the most. Her three trips included one to Israel valued at $23,303, sponsored by the American Israel Education Foundation. She didn't respond to a request for comment.

Photos: Scenes from historic speaker vote of 118th Congress

SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE
KEVIN McCARTHY

The sign at the office of House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of Calif., is installed on Capitol Hill in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/ Matt Rourke)

Matt Rourke

Dean of the House Rep. Hal Rogers, R-Ky., swears in Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., as House Speaker on the House floor at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Incoming House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of Calif., speaks on the House floor at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Newly elected Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy of Calif., speaks to the 118th Congress in the House chamber, in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Incoming House Speaker Kevin McCarthy of Calif., holds the gavel after accepting it from House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries of N.Y., on the House floor at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

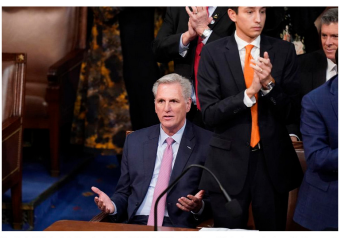
Andrew Harnik

House Speaker-elect Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., gestures for silence from his Republican colleagues as House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries of N.Y., speaks on the House floor at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

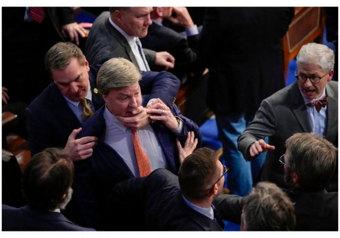
Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., smiles after winning the 15th vote in the House chamber as the House enters the fifth day trying to elect a speaker and convene the 118th Congress in Washington, early Saturday, Jan. 7, 2023. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon



Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., reacts after Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., voted "present" in the House chamber as the House meets for the fourth day to elect a speaker and convene the 118th Congress in Washington, Friday, Jan. 6, 2023. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon



Rep. Richard Hudson, R-N.C., left, pulls Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., back as they talk with Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., and other during the 14th round of voting for speaker as the House meets for the fourth day to try and elect a speaker and convene the 118th Congress in Washington, Friday, Jan. 6, 2023. At right is Rep. Patrick McHenry, R-N.C. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

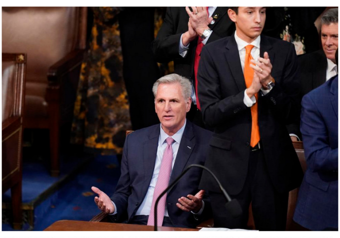
Andrew Harnik

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., talks to Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., after Gaetz voted "present" in the House chamber as the House meets for the fourth day to elect a speaker and convene the 118th Congress in Washington, Friday, Jan. 6, 2023. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

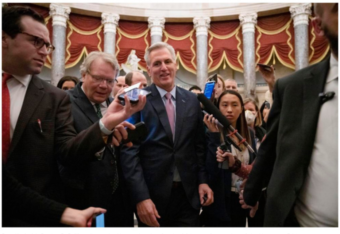
Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., walks to the House chamber, Friday, Jan. 6, 2023, to attend the 14th vote for speaker of the House, on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/Jacquelyn Martin)

Jacquelyn Martin



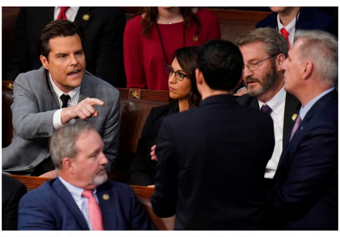
Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., reacts after Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., voted "present" in the House chamber as the House met for the fourth day to elect a speaker Friday in Washington.

Alex Brandon, Associated Press



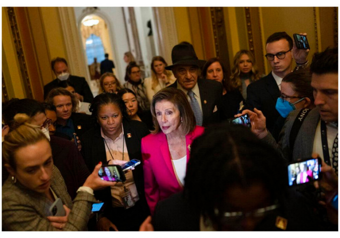
Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., walks to the House chamber for the 14th vote for speaker of the House on Friday in Washington.

Jacquelyn Martin, Associated Press



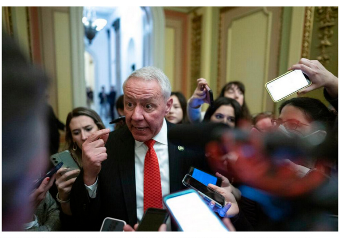
Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., talks to Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., after Gaetz voted "present" in the House chamber during the 14th round of voting Friday at the Capitol.

Alex Brandon, Associated Press



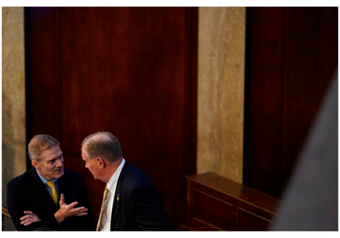
Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and her husband Paul Pelosi walk surrounded by media on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, after the House adjourned following three failed attempts to select a Speaker of the House for the 118th Congress. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Carolyn Kaster



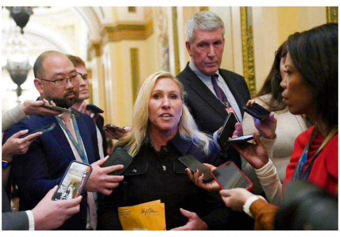
Rep. Ken Buck, R-Colo., a member of the conservative House Freedom Caucus, talks to reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, after the House adjourned following three failed attempts to select a Speaker of the House for the 118th Congress. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Carolyn Kaster



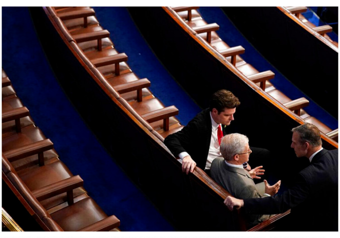
Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, speaks with Rep. Trent Kelly, R-Miss., after the House adjourned without electing a new speaker during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik



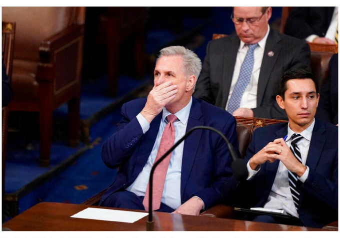
Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., talks with reporters on Capitol Hill in Washington, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, after the House adjourned following three failed attempts to elect a new Speaker of the House for the 118th Congress. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Susan Walsh



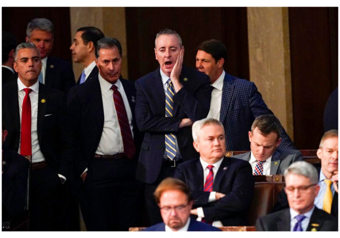
Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., talks with Rep. Patrick McHenry, R-N.C., center, and Rep. Scott Perry, R-Pa., talk after the House adjourned for the day without electing a new House Speaker during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik



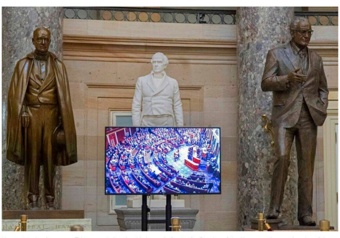
Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., listens as the second round of votes are cast for the next Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon



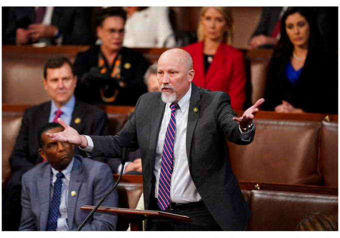
Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, R-Pa., yawns after the third round of votes for House Speaker on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon



House chamber is seen on TV screen, during the third round of votes for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

Jose Luis Magana



Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, speaks to nominate Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, for the third round of votes for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, R-N.Y., reacts after being nominated for a third round of votes for Speaker of the House in the House chamber on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., shakes hands with Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., after nominating him for the third round of votes for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., reacts after being nominated by Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., for the third round of votes for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., arrives to the House chamber before the vote for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, nominates Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., for House Speaker ahead of a second round of voting during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., nominates Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, for Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Kevin McCarthy of Calif., listens as votes are cast for next Speaker of the House during the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., talks with Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., during the vote for House Speaker on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Alex Brandon

House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., walks from the office of the Speaker of the House on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol in Washington, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023. There is no name plaque yet above the entrance. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Carolyn Kaster

House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., bottom right, is applauded after he was nominated to be the new Speaker of the House by Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., in the House chamber on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon

Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., arrives during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Outgoing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of Calif., stands with Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

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Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., arrives during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Republicans applaud as Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., nominates Rep. Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., as House Speaker during opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan 3, 2023, in Washington. (AP Photo/Andrew Harnik)

Andrew Harnik

Rep. Steve Scalise, R-La., greets lawmakers in the chamber on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

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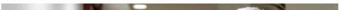
Rep. (((Adam Schiff))), D-Calif., is seated in the House chamber on the opening day of the 118th Congress at the U.S. Capitol, Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023, in Washington.(AP Photo/Alex Brandon)

Alex Brandon