**Republicans Face Angry Voters at Town Halls, Hinting at Broader Backlash**

After a monthlong honeymoon for the G.O.P. at the start of President Trump’s term, lawmakers are confronting a groundswell of fear and disaffection in districts around the country.

**By**[**Robert Jimison**](https://www.nytimes.com/by/robert-jimison)

Robert Jimison, who covers Congress, reported from Trinity County in the 17th Congressional District of Texas.

* Feb. 23, 2025

Some came with complaints about Elon Musk, President Trump’s billionaire ally who is carrying out an assault on the federal bureaucracy. Others demanded guarantees that Republicans in Congress would not raid the social safety net. Still others chided the G.O.P. to push back against Mr. Trump’s moves to trample the constitutional power of Congress.

When Representative Pete Sessions, Republican of Texas, arrived at a crowded community center on Saturday in the small rural town of Trinity in East Texas, he came prepared to deliver a routine update on the administration’s first month in office. Instead, he fielded a barrage of frustration and anger from constituents questioning Mr. Trump’s agenda and his tactics — and pressing Mr. Sessions and his colleagues on Capitol Hill to do something about it.

“The executive can only enforce laws passed by Congress; they cannot make laws,” said Debra Norris, a lawyer who lives in Huntsville, arguing that **the mass layoffs and agency closures Mr. Musk has spearheaded were unconstitutional. “When are you going to wrest control back from the executive and stop hurting your constituents?”**

Louis Smith, a veteran who lives in East Texas, told Mr. Sessions that he agreed with the effort to root out excessive spending, but he criticized the way it was being handled and presented to the public.

“I like what you’re saying, but you need to tell more people,” Mr. Smith said. “The guy in South Africa is not doing you any good — he’s hurting you more than he’s helping,” he added, referring to Mr. Musk and drawing nods and applause from many in the room.

In Georgia, Representative Rich McCormick [struggled to respond as constituents shouted, jeered and booed at his response to questions](https://www.ajc.com/politics/mccormick-confronted-by-angry-crowd-over-support-for-trumps-agenda/A4FRX7YIUFD2RK7SFTNOKGMDQY/) about Mr. Musk’s access to government data. In Wisconsin, Representative Scott Fitzgerald was asked to defend the administration’s budget proposals as [voters demanded to know whether cuts to essential services were coming](https://www.tmj4.com/news/washington-county/west-bend-voters-raise-concerns-about-pres-trump-and-elon-musk-at-republican-congressmans-town-hall).

**Many of the most vocal complaints came from participants who identified themselves as Democrats,** but a number of questions pressing Mr. Sessions and others around the country came from Republican voters. During a telephone town hall with Representative Stephanie Bice in Oklahoma, a man who identified himself as a Republican and retired U.S. Army officer [voiced frustration over potential cuts to veterans benefits.](https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?ref=watch_permalink&v=1006746584838842)

“How can you tell me that DOGE with some college whiz kids from a computer terminal in Washington, D.C., without even getting into the field, after about a week or maybe two, have determined that it’s OK to cut veterans benefits?” the man asked.

Beyond town halls, some Democrats have [organized a number of protests](https://peekskillherald.com/23110/news/rally-denouncing-trump-and-musk-held-outside-u-s-rep-mike-lawlers-office/) outside the offices of vulnerable Republicans. More than a hundred demonstrators rallied outside the New York district office of Representative Mike Lawler. Elected Democrats are also facing fury from within the ranks of their party. A group of voters held closed-door meetings with members from the office of Senator Chuck Schumer, Democrat of New York and the minority leader, after a demonstration at his New York offices.

Some of the scenes recalled [the raucous town-hall meetings of 2009 that heralded the rise of the ultraconservative Tea Party](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/28/us/politics/tea-party-trump.html), where throngs of voters showed up protesting President Barack Obama’s health care law and railed against government debt and taxes. It is not yet clear whether the current backlash will persist or reach the same intensity as it did back then. But the tenor of the sessions suggests that, after a brief honeymoon period for Mr. Trump and Republicans at the start of their governing trifecta, voters beginning to digest the effects of their agenda may be starting to sour on it.

Representative Rich McCormick, a Republican from Georgia, also faced shouts and jeers from constituents at a meeting last week.

Mr. Sessions, who was first elected to Congress nearly three decades ago and represents a solidly Republican district, appeared unfazed by the disruptions on Saturday. Some audience members laughed at him and retorted with hushed but audible expletives when he spoke about his support of some of Mr. Trump’s policy proposals and early actions.

And some of his constituents were plainly pleased by what they had seen so far from the new all-Republican team controlling the White House and both chambers of Congress. Several cheered an executive order [barring transgender women and girls](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/05/us/politics/trump-order-transgender-athletes-womens-sports.html) from participating in school athletic programs designated for female students, applauded [plans to shrink the Department of Education](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/13/us/politics/linda-mcmahon-confirmation-hearing-education-secretary.html) and welcomed calls from Mr. Sessions to end remote work flexibility for federal employees.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to have a reduction in force,” Mr. Sessions told the crowd.

And while many in the room voiced displeasure over the sweeping changes underway in Washington, some were agitating for bolder action to address what they called government corruption — not for pumping the brakes.

As Mr. Sessions spoke about the administration’s efforts to streamline bureaucracy and root out wasteful spending, shouts erupted.

“Take care of it, Congressman,” one woman said, interrupting him.

“Do something about it,” another man added.

One man’s voice rose above the others railing against nongovernmental organizations that receive federal money: “They’re laundering money to NGOs. Who’s in jail?”

Still, much of the pressure came from constituents concerned about how he might be enabling Mr. Trump to enact policies that could hurt them.

John Watt, the chairman of the Democratic Party in nearby Nacogdoches County, asked for guarantees from the congressman that he would oppose any cuts to Social Security if Mr. Trump and Mr. Musk turned their attention to the entitlement program.

**“Will you be courageous enough to stand up to them?” Mr. Watt asked.**

Mr. Sessions spoke at length about his support for the program, but said he could not promise it would be insulated from the blunt cuts Republicans in Washington are seeking across the government. Instead, he said he supported a comprehensive audit of the program that could result in some cuts.

“I’m not going to tell you I will never touch Social Security,” Mr. Sessions said, parting ways with Mr. Trump, who campaigned [saying he never would](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/14/business/trump-social-security-benefits.html). “What I will tell you is that I believe we’re going to do for the first time in years a top-to-bottom review of that. And I will come back, and I will do a town-hall meeting in your county and place myself before you and let you know about the options. But I don’t know what they’re proposing right now.”

It was a nod to the uncertainty surrounding the Republican budget plan, even as House leaders hope to hold a vote on it within days. Already, the level of cuts they are contemplating to Medicaid [has drawn resistance](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/21/us/politics/medicaid-republicans-budget.html) from some G.O.P. lawmakers whose constituents depend heavily on the program, raising questions about whether they will have the votes to pass their blueprint at all.

The public pushback could further complicate that debate, as well as efforts to reach a spending agreement as lawmakers return to Washington this week with less than three weeks to avert a government shutdown.

The tenor of the town-hall meetings, including Mr. Sessions’s, suggested that voters were beginning to digest the effects of the Republican agenda.

Republicans generally hold fewer in-person open town halls than their Democratic counterparts, opting instead for more controlled settings, such as telephone town halls, that minimize the risk of public confrontations. But even before last week**, they had begun hearing frustration from voters, who have also expressed their discontent by**[**flooding the phones of congressional offices**](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/07/us/politics/congressional-phone-lines-trump-musk.html)**.**

With their already narrow majority in the House, G.O.P. lawmakers are in a fragile position. A voter backlash could sweep out some of their most vulnerable members in midterm elections next year. But the pushback in recent days has come not only in highly competitive districts but also in deeply Republican ones, suggesting a broader problem for the party.

And there is little sign that Mr. Trump is letting up. On Saturday, Mr. Trump said in a social media post that Mr. Musk “is doing a great job, but I would like to see him be more aggressive.” Mr. Musk responded by [sending government employees emails](https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/22/us/politics/elon-musk-email-federal-employees.html) that he said were “requesting to understand what they got done last week. Failure to respond will be taken as a resignation.”

“I have not yet begun to fight, and neither have you,” President Trump said at the Conservative Political Action Conference on Saturday.

Such remarks offer little cover for Republicans like Mr. Sessions facing tough questions from voters who are beginning to chafe at the changes Mr. Trump is pursuing.

But the congressman said that tense exchanges would not deter him from holding more events and seeking opportunities to communicate with his constituents, whether they agree with his positions or not. He said he would hold more events across the district next week, and hopes that after another week in Washington, he will be able to provide more clarity for those who show up.

“I heard them and they heard me,” he said of Saturday’s gathering. “And I don’t think there was a fight.”

A version of this article appears in print on Feb. 24, 2025, Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Anger at Town Halls Hints at Broader Backlash.