

G.O.P. Leadership Remains Silent Over George Santos's Falsehoods

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WASHINGTON — House Republican leaders were silent on Tuesday after Representative-elect George Santos admitted to a laundry list of falsehoods about his background but still vowed to be seated in Congress.

Mr. Santos acknowledged in a series of interviews on Monday that he lied about graduating from college and made misleading claims that he worked for Citigroup or Goldman Sachs. He also acknowledged owing thousands of dollars in unpaid rent and denied committing a crime anywhere in the world, despite a New York Times report to the contrary.

The muted response from party leaders suggested that so far they were prepared to mete out little, if any, punishment to an incoming lawmaker who, while deceiving voters, flipped an open seat formerly held by a Democrat and helped Republicans secure their razor-thin House majority.

House Republicans, led by Representative Kevin McCarthy of California, have consistently closed ranks around members of their party facing scrutiny for a litany of misdeeds, including candidates who rallied at the Capitol on Jan. 6 and sitting lawmakers who appeared at a white nationalist conference. In Mr. Santos's case, they likely have even less political incentive to take action.

If Republican leaders demanded Mr. Santos resign — and he did so — it would prompt a special election in a swing seat, a potential blow to Republicans' already precarious majority. And the incoming congressman had pledged to vote for Mr. McCarthy for speaker next week, a critical display of support for the Republican leader, who is facing a mini-revolt on the right and needs every vote he can get.

(Mr. Santos appeared to have deleted his entreaty on Twitter posted last week arguing that Republicans “MUST give the gavel” to Mr. McCarthy. Representatives for Mr. Santos did not immediately respond when asked about the deletion.)

Representatives for House leaders did not immediately respond to requests for comment or offer any statements on the record. Privately, House Republican leadership has appeared to concede that Mr. Santos's situation is problematic, but has justified a lack of public condemnation by making the case that Democrats have their own problematic members.

Representative Marjorie Taylor Greene, Republican of Georgia, previewed that argument on Twitter on Tuesday, conceding that Mr. Santos “lied about his resume” before pivoting to accuse several Democrats of also telling lies.

By Tuesday, however, House Republicans' campaign arm had scrubbed language claiming that Mr. Santos had earned degrees from both Baruch College and New York University, and that he had worked at Citigroup and Goldman, from his biography on its website.

Nick LaLota, an incoming House Republican, on Tuesday called for the Ethics Committee to investigate Mr. Santos. Mr. LaLota, a county legislator who will represent eastern Long Island in Congress, said that “countless Long Islanders” had expressed concern over the controversy and added that he would support an investigation by law enforcement officials if necessary.

“New Yorkers deserve the truth, and House Republicans deserve an opportunity to govern without this distraction,” he said.

Matt Brooks, the head of the Republican Jewish Coalition, an influential conservative group, said that Mr. Santos would no longer be welcome at its events.

Mr. Santos has said he is Catholic, but he has also claimed Jewish heritage on the campaign trail, and he recently told a Jewish news outlet that he was a nonobservant Jew. The Republican Jewish Coalition had previously billed Mr. Santos as a Jewish Republican at its events, including at its leadership conference in Las Vegas last month and a Hanukkah party on Long Island the night before The Times's report was published.

After reports in The Forward and CNN raised questions about Mr. Santos's claims that his maternal grandparents fled persecution in Ukraine and, later, fled Belgium during World War II, Mr. Brooks called on Mr. Santos to explain his past statements.

In his interview with The New York Post on Monday, Mr. Santos said, "I never claimed to be Jewish. I am Catholic. Because I learned my maternal family had a Jewish background I said I was 'Jew-ish.'"

On Tuesday, The Forward also reported that Mr. Santos had called himself "a proud American Jew" in a position paper that his campaign shared with Jewish and pro-Israel leaders. He also noted that he had been to Israel "numerous times from educational, business and leisurely trips," though he did not provide more details.



Representative-elect George Santos spoke at the Republican Jewish Coalition annual meeting in Las Vegas last month. Mikayla Whitmore for The New York Times

Mr. Brooks said on Tuesday that Mr. Santos had claimed to be Jewish, both in his public remarks and in personal conversations with the coalition.

"He deceived us and misrepresented his heritage," Mr. Brooks said in a statement.

The Nassau County Republican chairman, Joseph G. Cairo Jr., said in a statement that he was "deeply disappointed" in Mr. Santos, who he said had "broken the public trust" by mischaracterizing his background to voters.

Mr. Cairo, an influential Republican in the portion of Long Island covered by Mr. Santos's district, said last week that The Times's reporting raised serious concerns that he believed Mr. Santos needed to address.

In his statement on Tuesday, he said that he did not believe that Mr. Santos's apologies in interviews sufficiently addressed his past remarks, saying: "I expected more than just a blanket apology. The damage that his lies have caused to many people, especially those who have been impacted by the Holocaust, are profound."

But Mr. Cairo stopped short of calling for Mr. Santos's resignation or further investigation and seemed to accept the congressman-elect's emphatic assertion that he would take office in January.

"He has a lot of work to do to regain the trust of voters and everyone who he represents in Congress," Mr. Cairo said, later adding, "He must do the public's will in Washington."

Congress rarely takes serious disciplinary steps against its own members, unless their ethical misdeeds rise to a federal crime. The last House member expelled was James A. Traficant Jr., Democrat of Ohio, in 2002, after he was convicted of 10 felony counts including bribery, racketeering and tax evasion.

The House Ethics Committee, a bipartisan panel of lawmakers who have historically shied away from punishing their colleagues, has not commented on Mr. Santos's case and is in a state of limbo until a new Congress is seated on Jan. 3. Were the panel to launch an inquiry once Mr. Santos becomes a member of Congress, its investigations are known to drag on for months or even years and seldom result in a significant punishment.

Members are at times issued fines or made to stand in the well of the House for a public censure.

That occurred in the case of former Representative Charles B. Rangel, the powerful New York Democrat. The House voted in 2010 to censure Mr. Rangel, the most severe sanction it can administer short of expulsion, after an Ethics Committee investigation found that he had broken congressional rules by failing to report taxes on rental income from a villa in the Dominican Republic and misused his office to solicit fund-raising donations.

It's unclear whether lying to voters before taking office — by itself — would be a violation within the jurisdiction of the Ethics Committee, but campaign finance improprieties and making false statements on disclosures are often grounds for investigation. House rules also prohibit acting in a matter that brings discredit to the House.

Some embattled members have chosen to resign, especially under pressure from party

leadership. Representative Katie Hill, Democrat of California, resigned in 2019 as she faced a House ethics investigation into allegations that she had a sexual relationship with a member of her congressional staff, a violation of House rules.

Democrats were quick to call on Mr. Santos to step down.

Representative Hakeem Jeffries, Democrat of New York and the incoming House minority leader, blasted Mr. Santos last week.

“He appears to be a complete and utter fraud. His whole life story made up, and he’s going to have to answer that question: Did you perpetrate a fraud on the voters?” Mr. Jeffries told reporters in Washington.

But Mr. Jeffries said it would be up to Mr. McCarthy to force Mr. Santos to resign.

“It’s an open question to me as to whether this is the type of individual that the incoming majority should welcome to Congress,” Mr. Jeffries said. “That’s a question for Kevin McCarthy at this point in time.”

Representative Adam Kinzinger, a Republican of Illinois who is retiring from Congress and is a frequent critic of Mr. McCarthy, said the Republican leader was protecting Mr. Santos for political reasons.

“McCarthy needs his vote. That is why his lies to get elected will be forgiven. He literally lied to win. FRAUD,” he wrote on Twitter.