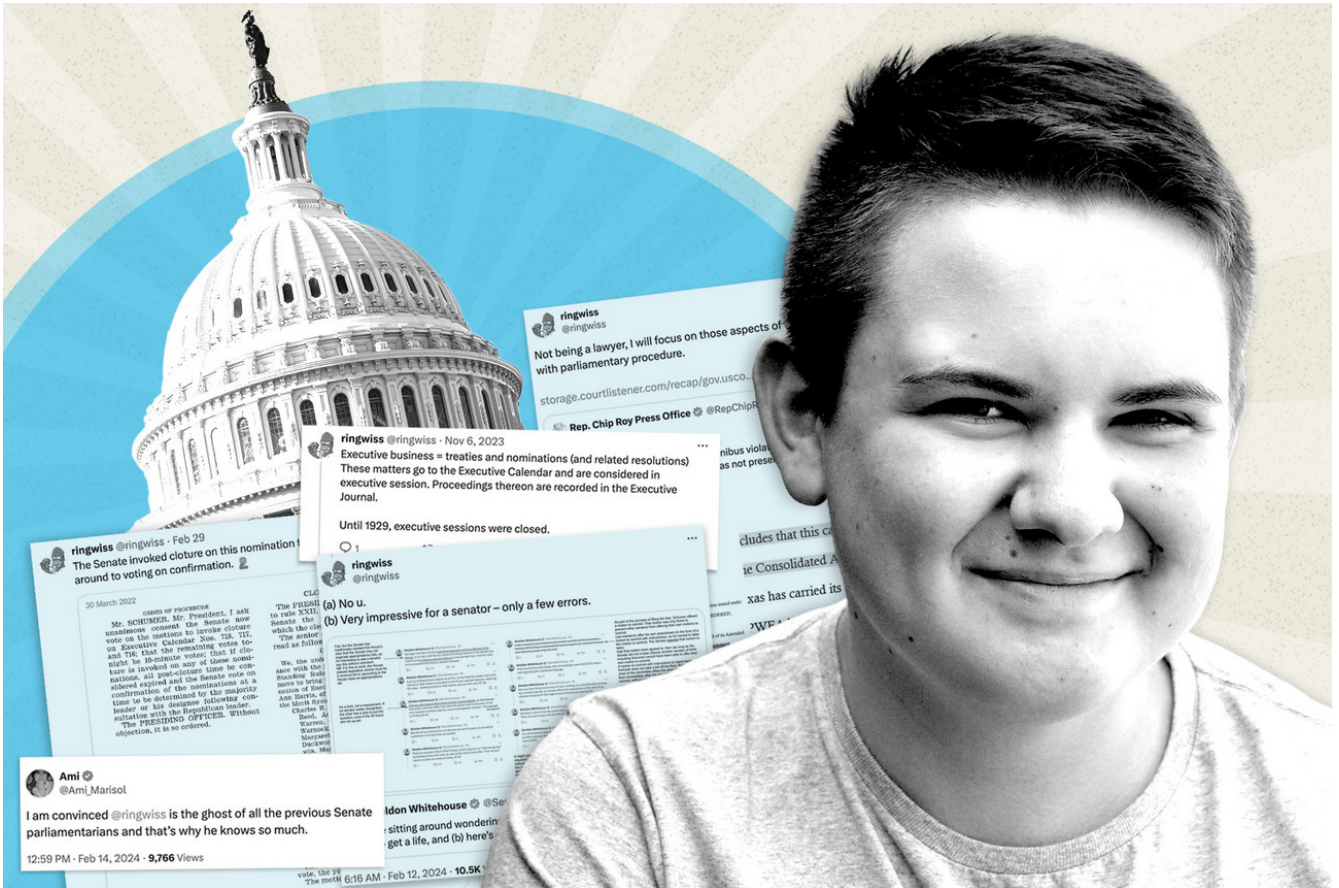


# How One Of Our Peers Is Kicking The Ass Of Corrupt Congress

Fri, 08 Mar 2024 08:44:06, admin45789, [post\_tag: how-one-of-our-peers-is-kicking-the-ass-of-corrupt-congress, category: news]

## The Mystery Social Media Account Schooling Congress on How to Do Its Job

Ringwiss, an influential X account, is changing how the public understands Congress, and how members understand their own power. Soon, ai will be doing this everywhere.



Kacper Surdy, the 20-year-old economics student behind the X account @ringwiss, reveals his identity here for the first time publicly. | POLITICO illustration/Photos by Francis Chung/POLITICO, X.com, Kacper Surdy

By Gabe Fleisher

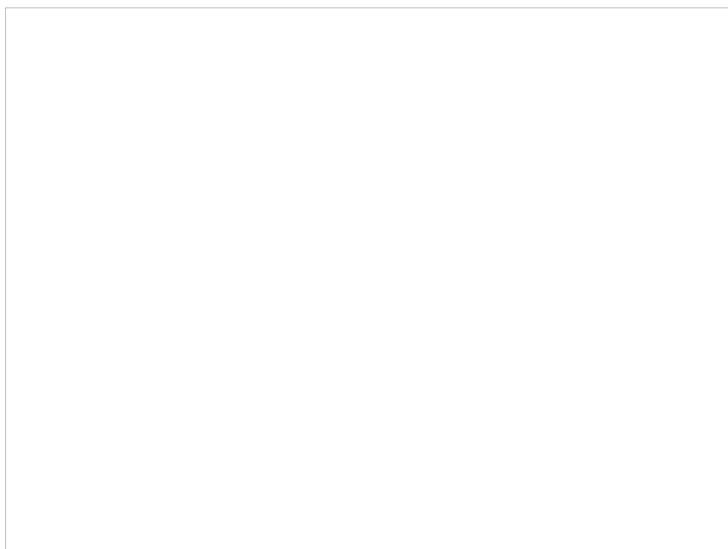
03/08/2024 05:00 AM EST

Gabe Fleisher is a writer based in Washington, D.C., and the author of the Wake Up To Politics newsletter.

Earlier this year, Matt Glassman — a congressional scholar at Georgetown who has spent most of his adult life studying the Hill — wanted to know the answer to an obscure procedural question. "When was the last time a ruling of the chair was overturned on appeal in the House?" he asked on X, tagging an anonymous user named @ringwiss.

Less than a minute later, the mysterious account responded with an answer — 1938 — and a decades-old edition of the Congressional Record to prove it.

That kind of speedy response time and wide-ranging legislative knowledge is what has made @ringwiss a go-to resource for staffers, lobbyists and reporters across Washington looking for answers on congressional procedures, especially in a year when lawmakers have been stretching procedures to novel ends and increasingly bucking leadership — creating a need for deeper understanding of oft-forgotten rules.



His tweets have gained renown around the Capitol for their nuanced discussions of arcane congressional rules and history, and for his comfort with correcting longtime lawmakers and Washington journalists alike. His following is only around 4,000, but it's a well-connected bunch, including congressional chiefs of staff, committee staff directors and other leading insiders.

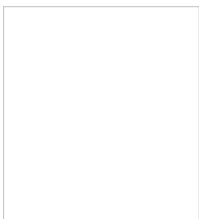
"He's just a complete parliamentary obsessive and savant, really like no one I've ever met, even people in the parliamentarian's office," Glassman told POLITICO Magazine.



The U.S. Capitol building in Washington. "He's just a complete parliamentary obsessive and savant, really like no one I've ever met, even people in the parliamentarian's office," Matt Glassman, a congressional scholar at Georgetown University, said of Kacper Surdy, aka #ringwiss. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

The catch: Nobody knows who he is.

Everyone has their theories. "My guess is somebody who worked for one of the leaders for many years," said Martin Paone, who spent three decades working in the Senate Democratic cloakroom and now lobbies for Prime Policy Group. "It takes a long time to pick up the knowledge that he seems to have."



Some suspect a former parliamentarian, or maybe a staffer at the Congressional Research Service. One House staffer thinks [he must be fueled by AI](#), almost a ChatGPT for the congressional set. "I am convinced @ringwiss is the ghost of all the previous Senate parliamentarians, and that's why he knows so much," a former Senate aide [recently wrote](#).

"There's an actual parlor game on Capitol Hill among staff who are trying to figure out who he is," Republican lobbyist Liam Donovan said in an interview. "Because he must be someone, right? He must be one of theirs."

But he's not. In fact, @ringwiss has never even stepped foot in the Capitol, much less worked there. The account, which lists its location as "Durham," uses Homer Simpson's head as a profile photo and frequently runs circles around veteran congressional experts, is run by Kacper Surdy, a 20-year-old economics student at Durham University in England. He is revealing his identity here for the first time publicly; previously, he has seemed to enjoy the Washington parlor game of trying to guess it, retweeting or engaging with those who try.

Surdy may live some 5,000 miles from Washington, but he has a favorite Senate presiding officer (Cory Booker) and a favorite House procedure (defeat of the previous question, last seen in 1988). When he gets home from classes, he immediately turns on the live-feeds of the House and Senate floors and keeps them on in the background for the rest of the night.

"When the Senate isn't doing anything, there's a quiet hum that's captured by the microphones," Surdy told POLITICO Magazine. "And that's very, very soothing. It's kind of like white noise. It's very relaxing, even when nothing's going on."

Surdy's tweets often take on an educational function, such as his [mammoth threads with another anonymous account](#) explaining, step by step, various features of Congress for a general audience. A recent thread on defeating the previous question — which has taken on a fresh importance as Democrats consider using it to move a Ukraine aid package — fetched [67,000 views](#). Another breaking down the [parliamentary errors](#) in a recent judicial opinion on House proxy voting was seen by more than 200,000.

## MOST READ



1.

[Katie Porter pulled a Trump move after losing. Democrats are livid.](#)

2.

[Intel agencies eye brief for Trump, amid fears he could spill secrets](#)

3.

[Haley ran a near perfect race. She just couldn't figure out Trump.](#)

4.

[The 7 Worst Instances of Bad Behavior at the State of the Union](#)

5.

[Arizona investigators issue grand jury subpoenas as state's 2020 Trump election probe accelerates](#)

His missives are always meticulously backed up by evidence, be they clips unearthed from deep in the C-SPAN archives or highlighted screenshots of [Deschler's Precedents](#), an 18-volume House reference book. He often corrects even lawmakers themselves about the rules of their own chambers. "Very impressive for a senator," he replied recently to one member's tweet about procedures. "Only a few errors."

"When we think of the best of Twitter, of what it could be," Glassman said, "it's when you find a guy like this, who as best I can tell is sitting in London watching congressional procedure

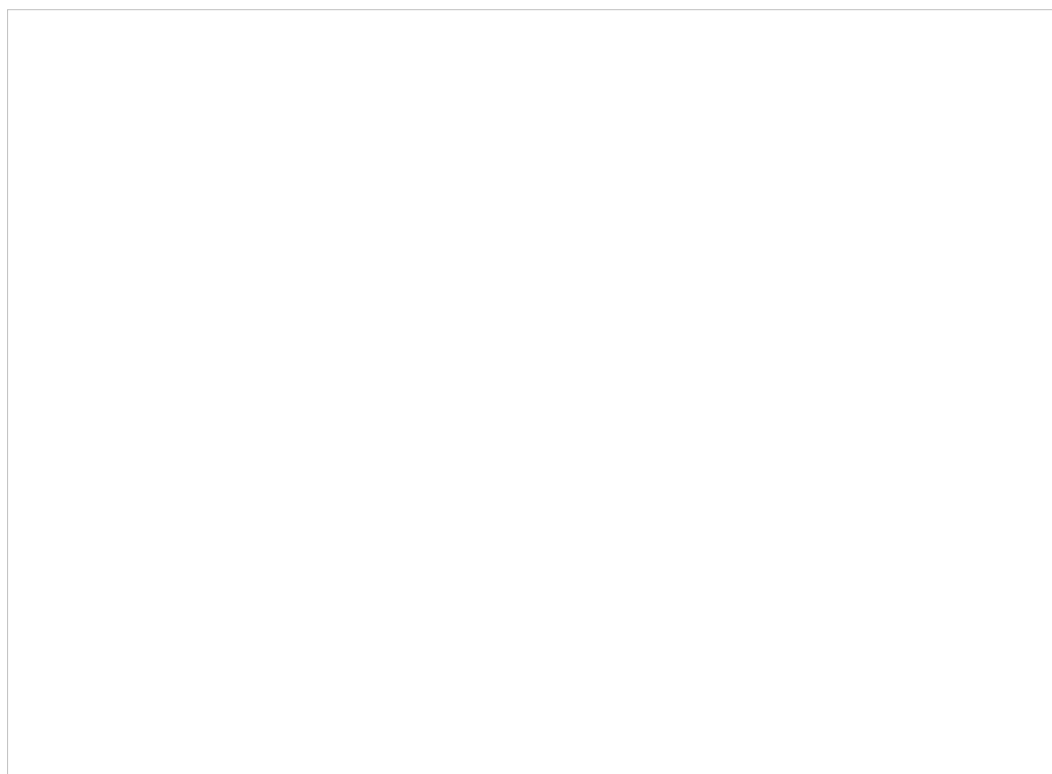
obsessively, when his knowledge can be unleashed to both elite audiences in D.C. ... and, really, anybody who wants to understand what's going on."

---

**Surdy first began** following American politics during the 2020 election, which he said many of his friends and peers in the UK paid close attention to as well. A few months later, he watched the 2021 House speaker's election, and became fascinated with the unusual-sounding procedures governing the session. "I've been hooked ever since," he said.

He first started tweeting in early 2022, and accelerated his posts during the Inflation Reduction Act debates that summer. He caught Donovan's attention during this period, when he tweeted about a pair of provisions that had been struck from the IRA — worth upward of \$45 million — that almost no one else had noticed. "That's when I was like, 'Holy cow. This guy's special,'" Donovan said. (Donovan, a self-described @ringwiss "evangelist," called him the "most encyclopedic authority on the procedure of the United States Congress" that he had ever encountered.)

His audience often surges during moments of peak parliamentary procedure. "My following just exploded" during the 2023 speaker's election, Surdy said, as larger accounts noticed his detailed accounting of the rules behind the unusually lengthy balloting.



Surdy's tweets regularly include references to the British Parliament and other European legislatures — he was born in Poland and has lived in the UK since he was 4 — but he says his entry into parliamentary politics was watching the U.S. Congress. Although Surdy said he leans to the left, living across the pond gives him the advantage of watching Congress without feeling a personal stake. That way, he can pay attention to procedural machinery without getting bogged down by the policy details that might distract other C-SPAN viewers.

"When it comes to policy debates, I do tend to favor the Democrats," he said, "but I guess it's easier to set those things aside if it's not making a direct impact on your life." (Another advantage of his geographic distance: Congress generally gavel in around 10 a.m., perfect timing for Surdy, whose classes are just coming to an end at 3 p.m. in the UK.)

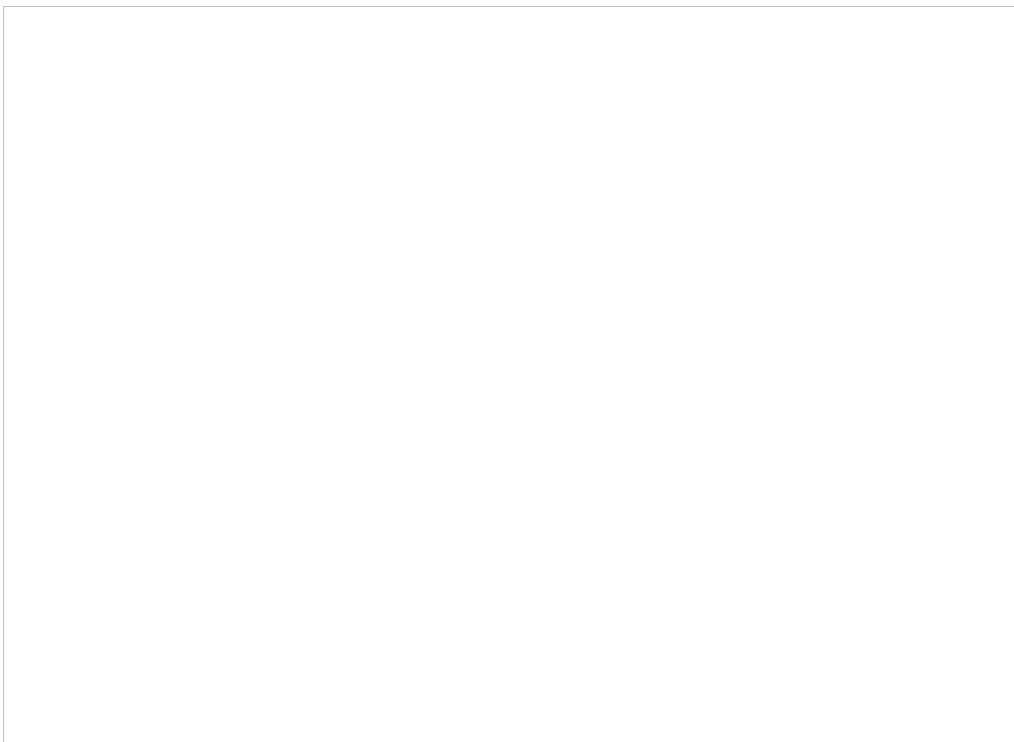
When discussing his extensive procedural knowledge, Surdy is casual — even nonchalant. He said much of what he knows comes simply from his daily viewing of the House and Senate; whenever something happens on the floor that he doesn't understand, he leafs through Congress' various rulebooks until he can make sense of it. Last year, he finished a front-to-back reading of "House Practice," which he referred to as a "condensed version" of House precedents. The manual is more than 1,000 pages. ("A pleasure to read," he called it.)



Surdy said much of what he knows comes from his daily viewing of the House and Senate; whenever something happens on the floor that he doesn't understand, he leafs through Congress' various rulebooks until he can make sense of it. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

But, despite his modesty, those who interact with Surdy are deeply impressed.

"He is clearly someone who does their homework," said Michael Thorning, director of structural democracy at the Bipartisan Policy Center, praising Surdy's ability to sift through "untapped but publicly available resources" to find details others miss.



Sarah Binder, a political scientist at George Washington University, called him a "procedural flytrap," marveling at the "broad expanse and depths" of his knowledge and his seemingly unerring memory. "Nothing escapes him."

"He's just a joy to deal with," said former Hill staffer Ira Goldman, who *a/so* tweets about congressional procedure using a Homer Simpson profile picture. (Both he and Surdy said that was coincidence.) "It's like having someone in the next cubicle," Goldman said of his frequent online banter with his fellow Homer.

Several of Surdy's expert followers said it was rare for procedural specialists to be so steeped in the rules of both the House *and* Senate, and to be able to deploy such detailed comparisons with European parliaments to boot.

None of them knew they were referring to a 20-year-old.

It's unlikely Surdy would have gained Washington's attention even a few years ago, when — the occasional nuclear option aside — congressional procedure was a sleepy and largely fixed domain. Although Congress was more fluid in prior decades, Daniel Schuman of the POPVOX Foundation said in an interview, the House and Senate have largely been stuck in a "steady state" since the 1980s, as congressional leaders have rapidly accumulated power at the expense of deliberation.

But, Schuman said, something of a "rules revolution" has begun to brew in Congress lately, with House Republicans ousting their own speaker and defeating several procedural motions, while their Senate counterparts have freelanced on foreign aid and military nominations, bucking Mitch McConnell.

Surdy, for one, views many of these developments as welcome changes: His tweets often feature critiques of Congress' centralized power (and how it is unquestioningly reported). He likes to note that leaders — by the rules alone — are mostly figureheads; it is only years of members following the pack, and choosing not to learn their own power, that have made the status quo so rigid.



"You know, people say, 'Oh, Schumer is bringing up this bill, Johnson's blocking this bill.' And that's just not how any of this works," said Surdy. "[Congressional leaders] do not have the power to make decisions about the order of business, what the House debates, how long it debates it for, what amendments you can offer. All those decisions are made by the House and Senate themselves. If a majority in the House, or a 60-vote majority in the Senate, wants to do something, they can."





Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell and Majority Leader Chuck Schumer confer at the U.S. Capitol on Feb. 27, 2024. "You know, people say, 'Oh, Schumer is bringing up this bill, Johnson's blocking this bill.' And that's just not how any of this works," said Surdy. | Francis Chung/POLITICO

One example Surdy cited was senators who complain about the chamber going on recess — even though they almost always offer the unanimous consent needed for the Senate to leave town. But it is more comfortable to hide behind and blame leaders — usually the other party's, but increasingly, even their own — rather than object. Journalists, he noted, rarely step in with a correction.

"There's a huge misconception, even among people who work in Congress, that only the majority leader can" move to proceed to a piece of legislation in the Senate, Surdy added. But, under certain circumstances, any senator can do so, even members of the minority: Sen. Roger Marshall (R-Kan.), for example, [forced consideration of the House-passed Israel aid bill](#) last November.

"It's just frustrating to see that members have so much power, but they just don't take the initiative," Surdy said. "They just defer to leadership all the time. ... Their constituents have entrusted them with this huge responsibility, and they just leave everything up to their party leaders."

Other experts emphasized that political realities often prevent lawmakers from stepping out of line. "Lawmakers have a lot of pressures on how they ultimately decide to vote," Binder said, noting that members are influenced by factors like constituent opinions and leadership pressure, not just their own policy views. "And that means that, yes, the majority can work its will. But if you need to change the rules, or break a rule, or use or deploy a rule against leadership, even against a weakened leadership, it can be hard, really hard to get to a [majority] in Congress."

"There's a collective action problem that arises," Schuman added. Rocking the boat can earn reprisals, like loss of committee memberships or precious donor dollars.

But such punishments are less effective coming from weak leaders. A group of House Republicans are currently [readying a discharge petition](#) for Ukraine aid, showing that not only are far-right members willing to assert the rules for obstructive purposes, but centrist members are now doing so for arguably productive ends as well. With Congress passing a [historically low level of legislation](#), Binder said, "there's been this sort of unpeeling of the procedural onion here of people looking for solutions."





But, to force a change, lawmakers must first know the rules, and nearly everyone interviewed for this article agreed that only a handful of them are well-versed in the minutiae. (Interestingly, so far, they said, it is Freedom Caucus members who seem most interested in expanding their procedural knowledge to combat leadership.) "It's not like there's a finishing school" for members of Congress, Schuman pointed out.

In that vacuum, @ringwiss — unusually well-read on procedure and happy to share his knowledge — has emerged as a helpful narrator, one whose missives are being read at the very highest levels. Donovan recalled a recent meeting inside a congressional leader's office suite, when a top staffer surprised him by asking him if he knew the identity of the account owner. (He didn't.) Staffers in the office had been debating which of their Hill colleagues were behind it. "His growing profile is absolutely a function of circumstance and the weird moment in our politics, that any of these answers need to be thought about," said Donovan.

As long as the weirdness continues, Surdy will be there to tweet about it. He said he is unsure what he will do after graduation — maybe grad school for political science — but that he has no plans to stop his X account, or to try and monetize it. "I do it because it brings me enjoyment," Surdy said. "And, you know, I think it's nice to be able to help other people at the same time."