

THE BOWLINE GROUP

THE BOWLINE BRIEF

PEOPLE | POLITICS | POLICY

Politics, government affairs and public safety
for the law enforcement community.

WEEKLY EDITION

September 18, 2026

WHAT HAPPENED. WHAT IT MEANS. WHAT COMES NEXT.

THE WEEK IN 60 SECONDS

Here is what I think you need to know this week

- 1 The House has left Washington early.** Speaker Mike Johnson sent members home ahead of the midterms with a long post-election agenda waiting. From here, almost everything Congress does will be viewed through the campaign.
- 2 Republicans are openly defining the House ceiling.** Majority Leader Steve Scalise says 225 seats is a plausible high-water mark. That optimism matters, but so does the fact that GOP leaders are talking publicly about a very narrow range of outcomes.
- 3 Labor is not behaving like a single political bloc.** Republican Rep. Mike Lawler has collected 20 union endorsements in one of the country's most important swing House seats. For organized labor, access and voting records are increasingly colliding with party alignment.
- 4 Flock moved from controversy to legislation.** A bipartisan House bill would pressure states to sharply restrict automated license-plate readers by putting 10% of certain federal highway funds at risk.
- 5 The grant calendar is getting real.** Byrne JAG, body-worn camera, crime-gun intelligence and intellectual-property enforcement deadlines begin hitting now and continue through early October.
- 6 Federal law-enforcement leadership remains unsettled.** The White House withdrew its nominee to lead ICE on September 17, leaving another major enforcement agency without a Senate-confirmed director.

MY READ

The campaign has swallowed Washington. The most useful signals now are not speeches - they are where candidates are spending money, which constituencies are breaking ranks, and which policy fights are being turned into election issues.

POLITICS

The House is now a campaign, not a legislature

Speaker Mike Johnson recessed the House early this week, sending members back to their districts before the November election. That means the next six weeks will be dominated by field activity, advertising and turnout rather than meaningful floor work.

Republicans are trying to define a winnable map

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise told Axios that 225 Republican seats represents a realistic high-water mark. That would be a governing majority, but not a comfortable one. The more important part of the statement is what it tells us about expectations: Republican leaders believe they can survive the national environment, but they are not talking about a wave.

MY READ

The House is still the chamber I would worry about first if I were running the Republican operation. A narrow majority can be saved, but it leaves almost no room for candidate mistakes, bad local news or turnout slippage.

Labor is becoming a real cross-pressure

New York's 17th District is a useful case study. Republican Rep. Mike Lawler has secured endorsements from 20 labor unions even as the broader AFL-CIO structure supports his Democratic challenger, Cait Conley. In a district where union households matter, that split is not cosmetic.

For law enforcement unions, this is familiar territory. Members can be culturally or politically different from the national labor movement, and elected officials increasingly understand that a labor endorsement cannot always be predicted by the letter next to a candidate's name.

WHY IT MATTERS

If Republicans can peel off union households in close districts without abandoning their broader coalition, they create a path to survive a difficult midterm. If Democrats consolidate those voters, the House becomes much harder for the GOP to hold.

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS

Washington has entered the pre-election freeze

The House's early departure does not mean the policy fights disappeared. It means they are being pushed into the lame-duck session or the next Congress. Public-safety organizations should assume that legislative movement will be limited before Election Day and use this period to shape what comes next.

A law-enforcement memorial and safety bill remains in play

The National Law Enforcement Officers Remembrance, Support, and Community Outreach Act would authorize \$6 million annually for seven fiscal years for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund. The House has acted; supporters are now pressing the Senate. The money would support officer-safety and wellness work, fatality and injury data, and public engagement.

**FOR OUR
CLIENTS**

This is the period to build the 2027 agenda. Identify the bills, appropriations accounts and administrative changes that matter before the new Congress is sworn in. Waiting until January means starting behind everyone who used the fall to organize.

Immigration enforcement remains politically volatile

The White House withdrew Lance Schroyer's nomination to lead Immigration and Customs Enforcement on September 17 after the nomination stalled in the Senate. ICE has not had a Senate-confirmed director since 2017. At the same time, Democrats are introducing legislation designed to restrict or redirect immigration-enforcement activity, keeping the agency at the center of the campaign.

MY READ

Immigration will remain one of the clearest Republican attempts to turn the midterm into a choice election. But operational controversies and leadership instability give Democrats material to argue about execution rather than border policy in the abstract.

GRANTS & FUNDING

The September deadline wall is here

PROGRAM	GRANTS.GO V	JUSTGRANT S	WHY IT MATTERS
Byrne JAG - State Formula	Sept. 18	Sept. 25	Broad criminal-justice capacity and state pass-through funding.
Intellectual Property Enforcement	Sept. 23	Sept. 30	Counterfeit goods and product-piracy enforcement; relevant to organized retail crime.
Crime Gun Intelligence Center Integration	Sept. 24	Oct. 1	Local law-enforcement crime-gun intelligence capability and integration.
Body-Worn Camera Policy & Implementation	Sept. 25	Oct. 2	BWC implementation, policy and supporting program capacity.
Byrne JAG - Local Formula	Oct. 9	Oct. 16	Direct formula funding for eligible local jurisdictions.

DO THIS NOW

Do not start with the grant notice. Start with the agency's actual need - personnel, cameras, intelligence capacity, technology, training or a specific enforcement problem - and match the funding to it. The deadline should accelerate a real project, not create a fake one.

LAW ENFORCEMENT LENS

The Flock fight just became federal

This week changed the automated license-plate-reader debate. Reps. Raja Krishnamoorthi, a Democrat from Illinois, and Michael Cloud, a Republican from Texas, introduced the bipartisan No FLOCK Act on September 15.

The bill would require states to restrict ALPR use to five categories: toll enforcement, stolen vehicles, missing or endangered people, vehicles tied to felony warrants, and vehicles involved in felony investigations. After a two-fiscal-year implementation period, noncompliant states could lose 10% of certain federal surface-transportation funding.

THE SHIFT

Last week the question was whether individual cities and states would restrict Flock. This week the question is whether Washington will use federal money to force every state to write rules.

The law-enforcement argument has to be operational

The strongest defense of ALPRs is not that privacy concerns are imaginary. They are not. The stronger argument is that stolen vehicles, missing persons, felony suspects and serious investigations are exactly the kinds of cases where fast vehicle-location information can matter.

That means law enforcement should be at the table defining audit requirements, search justification, retention periods, interagency access and discipline for misuse. If agencies do not help write workable safeguards, the rules will be written around the worst abuse case.

MY READ

The No FLOCK Act is restrictive, but it also concedes something important: even the sponsors preserve core public-safety uses. That is the opening. The fight should be over how to protect legitimate investigative capability while making personal or unauthorized use difficult, visible and punishable.

WHAT I'M HEARING

The political conversation underneath the headlines

This is not gossip. It is my read of where the reporting, money, campaign behavior and policy fights appear to be pointing.

- 1 Republicans want the closing argument to be a contrast.** They cannot afford a pure referendum on Washington, so expect crime, immigration, public safety and cultural issues to get louder.
- 2 Labor endorsements are becoming more transactional.** Candidates who show up, vote with a union on core issues and maintain relationships can break through partisan expectations.
- 3 Police technology is now a government-affairs portfolio.** ALPRs are only the beginning. AI, facial recognition, data sharing, drones and digital evidence will all require organized law-enforcement engagement.
- 4 Grant deadlines are exposing who is prepared.** Agencies with a defined project and current paperwork can move. Agencies starting from zero this week are already behind.

THE BOWLINE TAKE

The next six weeks are about leverage

Congress is largely off the field. Campaigns are not. That changes where influence is created.

Candidates are back home asking for endorsements, validators, money, volunteers and credibility. For law enforcement organizations, this is when relationships can be converted into commitments - not vague statements of support, but positions on bargaining rights, federal funding, officer safety, technology and criminal-justice policy.

The mistake would be to treat the election as something happening around us. The better approach is to decide what we need from the people asking for our support and make them answer now.

BOTTOM LINE Relationships create opportunity. The next six weeks are when those relationships are most valuable. Strategy is what turns them into results.

ON THE RADAR

What I am watching next

These may be next week's stories. Or they may disappear. Either way, they are on my screen.

HOUSE MAP	Watch whether Republican outside groups begin triaging districts or continue expanding the battlefield. That will tell us whether leadership's confidence is real.
LABOR	Watch for more split endorsements in competitive House and Senate races, especially from public-safety, building-trades and transportation unions.
NO FLOCK ACT	Watch for cosponsors, committee movement and state-level responses. The bipartisan sponsorship makes this harder to dismiss as a partisan messaging bill.
DOJ FUNDING	The September 23-25 Grants.gov deadlines are the immediate pressure point; local JAG continues into October.
IMMIGRATION	Watch who the White House chooses next for ICE and whether Senate confirmation is even realistic before the election.
LAME DUCK	Start tracking what Congress intends to move immediately after Election Day. A short post-election window can become very crowded very quickly.
THE BOWLINE BOTTOM LINE	Washington has shifted from legislating to campaigning. The House remains the central control fight. Labor is showing signs of political independence. Flock is now a federal issue. And the grant calendar is moving fast enough that agencies need to act, not browse.

Editorial note: Analysis labeled 'My Read,' 'What I'm Hearing' or 'The Bowline Take' reflects The Bowline Group's political judgment based on information available at publication time. The Bowline Brief is prepared for clients of The Bowline Group and is not legal advice.

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