



**PALLAS
CENTER**

GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

MINI STUDY

CIVICS LESSON FOR TEENS



GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN



PallasCenter.com

Terms of Use

This resource is for your family's personal use only. Please do not copy, share, or redistribute it in any way. If you know someone who would benefit from it, kindly direct them to www.pallascenter.com so they can get their own copy.

Full Terms of Use

License for Use

- This unit study is licensed for use within a single household.
- You may print as many copies as needed for your own children.

Restrictions

You may not:

- Share, forward, or give away the digital file.
- Upload it to any website, forum, or file-sharing service.
- Sell or distribute it in any form.
- Edit or alter the resource, or claim it as your own.

Co-ops & Classrooms

For homeschool groups, schools, or classrooms, please purchase one license per family. If you'd like to arrange a group license, contact us at sarah@pallascenter.com.

Copyright

All content is © 2025 Pallas Center. All rights reserved.

www.pallascenter.com

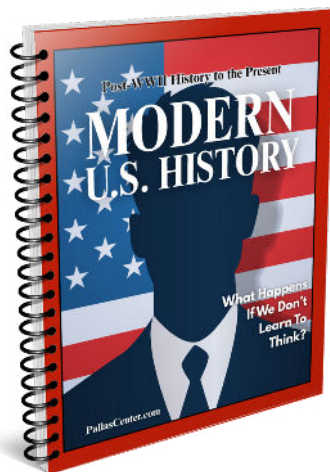


Study Modern U.S. History With Unit Studies For K-12 From PallasCenter.com !

Check Out All Our Unit Studies Here!

K-5 Resouces

Difficult history topics talked about in a way that younger students can understand with grade-level appropriate readings and activities.



- One Semester
- High School Course
- E-course & Textbook
- Source-linked
- Audio Podcast for All Lessons
- Moderated Discussion Forum



<https://pallascenter.com>

When Politics Stops Government

Government Shutdowns Happen When Congress Fails to Pass Funding Bills

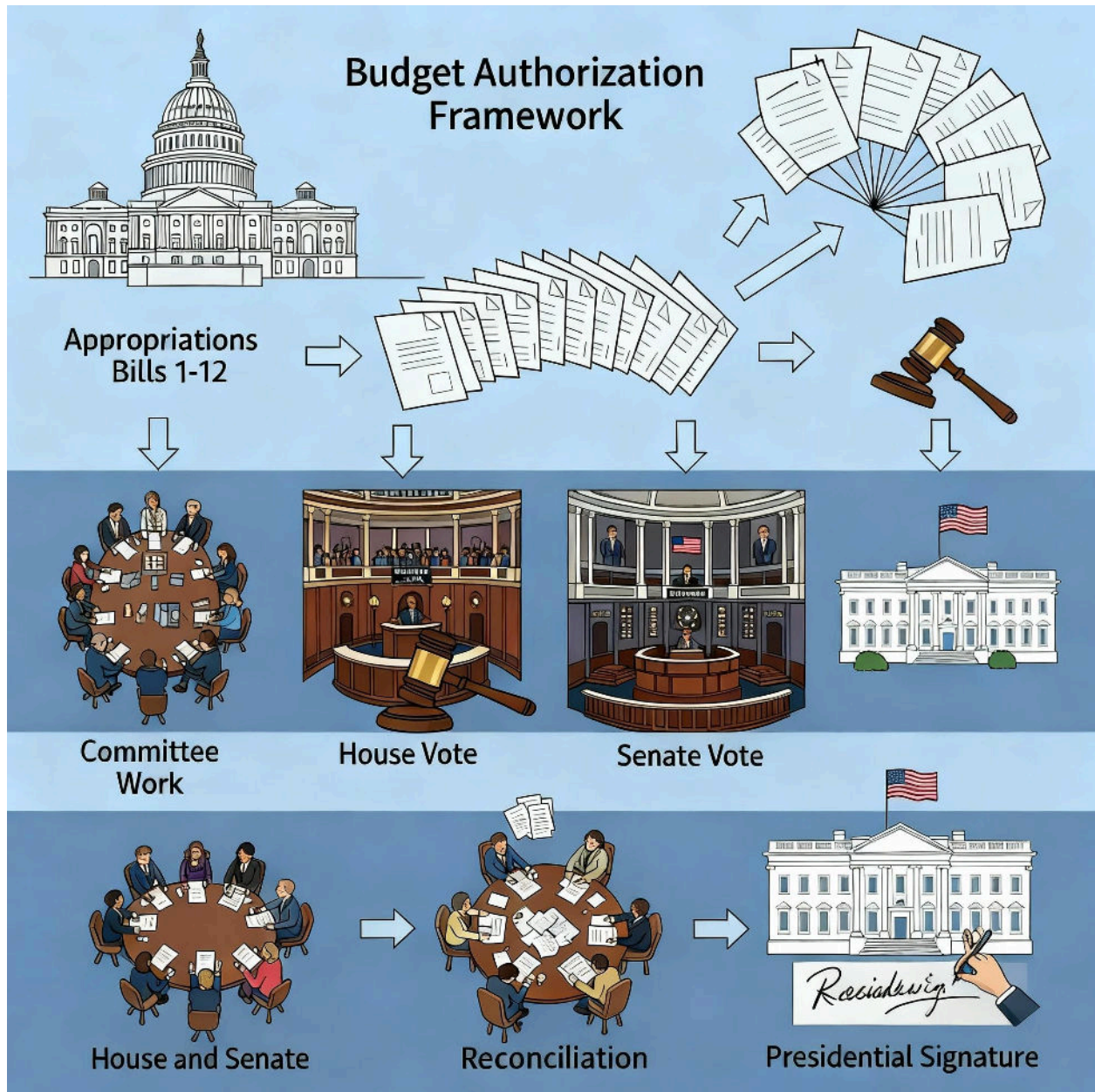
Every year, the United States Congress faces a critical responsibility: passing twelve separate appropriations bills to fund the federal government. These bills provide money for everything from national parks to food safety inspections to military operations. The Constitution grants Congress this “power of the purse,” meaning no money can be spent without Congressional approval. When lawmakers cannot agree on these funding bills before the fiscal year begins on October 1st, the government can shut down.^{1 2}

The process is supposed to work like this: Congress passes a budget authorization that serves as a framework, then creates twelve different appropriations bills through committee work. Each bill goes through hearings, votes in both the House and Senate, and reconciliation between the two chambers before landing on the president’s desk for signature. At each step, citizens can weigh in and make their voices heard.³

¹ Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

² Congress Unmoved by Imminent Government Shutdown Threat
<https://headlineusa.com/congress-unmoved-by-imminent-government-shutdown-threat/>

³ Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>



But in recent decades, this process has broken down. Since 1997, Congress has not once passed all twelve appropriations bills on time. Instead, lawmakers increasingly rely on “continuing resolutions” (CRs)—temporary measures that simply copy last year’s budget with minor adjustments and extend the deadline. This shortcuts accountability and erases public input from the budget process. When Congress

cannot even agree on a continuing resolution, or when the president refuses to sign it, a shutdown occurs. ^{4 5}

Before 1981, funding gaps didn't result in shutdowns; agencies just operated normally and expenses were covered retroactively. That changed when Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti (pictured below) issued legal opinions establishing that government work must generally cease until Congress agrees to pay for it. Since then, there have been numerous government shutdowns ranging from a single day to 35 days. The longest happened from December 2018 to January 2019 over funding for a proposed border wall. The 1995-1996 shutdown lasted 21 days when President Bill Clinton and House Speaker Newt Gingrich fought over balanced budget proposals. ⁶

Political brinkmanship drives most shutdowns. One party demands expensive or controversial programs, the other refuses, and neither side blinks as the deadline approaches. The effects ripple across society: hundreds of thousands of federal workers are furloughed or forced to work without pay, national parks close, food safety inspections halt, and disaster relief slows. Essential services like Social Security payments and Medicare continue because they're funded separately, but new enrollments stop. Meanwhile, members of Congress and the president continue receiving



⁴ Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

⁵ Congress Unmoved by Imminent Government Shutdown Threat
<https://headlineusa.com/congress-unmoved-by-imminent-government-shutdown-threat/>

⁶ More federal layoffs, healthcare cuts, and blocking the Epstein files: Breaking down the GOP government shutdown
<https://therealnews.com/breaking-down-the-gop-government-shutdown>

their paychecks—a fact that doesn't escape the public's notice. ⁷

The Executive Branch Used the Shutdown to Target Political Opponents and Reduce the Federal Workforce

The 2025 government shutdown revealed a controversial strategy: using the funding crisis as an opportunity to reshape the federal government according to the president's vision. In a leaked memo before the shutdown, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) instructed federal agencies to “use this opportunity” to permanently eliminate positions “not consistent with the president's priorities.” Russell Vought, the budget director and co-author of “Project 2025”—a blueprint for restructuring government—made it clear that the shutdown was a chance to bypass normal procedures for reducing the federal workforce. ⁸

President Trump openly celebrated this opportunity on social media, stating, “I can't believe the radical left Democrats gave me this unprecedented opportunity.” He announced plans to shut down what he called “Democrat agencies” and said the administration would begin firing federal employees within “a day or two.” By late Friday of the shutdown's first week, the administration had targeted over 4,000 employees across seven major federal departments, including 1,400 at Treasury and 1,200 at Health and Human Services. ⁹

This approach raised serious legal questions. Under federal guidelines, the government typically must give workers 60 days' notice before layoffs, and the Antideficiency Act prohibits the federal government from incurring new expenses

⁷ Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

⁸ Trump Administration Prepares for Mass Layoffs if Government Shuts Down
<https://headlineusa.com/trump-administration-prepares-for-mass-layoffs-if-government-shuts-down/>

⁹ Trump administration lays off thousands of federal workers during government shutdown
<https://justiceforkennedy.substack.com/p/trump-administration-lays-off-thousands>

during a shutdown—which some officials believed could include severance payments. Federal unions quickly sued, arguing the firings were illegal. Everett Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees, called it “disgraceful that the Trump administration has used the government shutdown as an excuse to illegally fire thousands of workers who provide critical services.”¹⁰



Everett Kelley, 2020. Photo by Keith Mellnick.

The administration also suspended \$8 billion in clean energy grants to 16 states led by Democratic governors and withheld \$18 billion for federal transportation projects in the New York region. This selective enforcement suggested that the shutdown was being weaponized against political opponents—a charge that gained credibility when administration officials explicitly stated that layoffs would be “Democrat-oriented.”

¹⁰ [Trump administration lays off thousands of federal workers during government shutdown](https://justiceforkennedy.substack.com/p/trump-administration-lays-off-thousands)
<https://justiceforkennedy.substack.com/p/trump-administration-lays-off-thousands>

The strategy turned federal workers into bargaining chips, demanding that hundreds of thousands continue working without pay while simultaneously threatening them with permanent job loss. ¹¹

Democrats and Republicans Disagreed Over Healthcare

Subsidies and Medicaid Cuts

At the heart of recent government shutdown debates lies a fundamental disagreement over healthcare policy. Democrats and Republicans have clashed repeatedly over two major issues: subsidies for health insurance, and proposed cuts to Medicaid, the government program that provides healthcare coverage to low-income families. ¹²

Approximately 24 million Americans receive tax credits that reduce the cost of their health insurance purchased through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) marketplace. When these enhanced credits were set to expire, Democrats pushed to include their renewal in any government funding bill. Without these subsidies, families could see their healthcare premiums double, making coverage unaffordable for many working Americans. Democrats argued that renewing these credits was essential to protecting families already struggling with the rising cost of living. ^{13 14}

Republicans, however, refused to include such costly provisions in short-term funding bills, arguing that the costs would not necessarily result in improved healthcare, and

¹¹ Trump administration lays off thousands of federal workers during government shutdown
<https://justiceforkennedy.substack.com/p/trump-administration-lays-off-thousands>

¹² The Urgent Healthcare Crisis at the Heart of the Government Shutdown
<https://inthesetimes.com/article/healthcare-crisis-government-shutdown-medicaid-one-big-beautiful-bill>

¹³ Healthcare is the hill Democrats should die on
<https://therealnews.com/healthcare-is-the-hill-democrats-should-die-on>

¹⁴ More federal layoffs, healthcare cuts, and blocking the Epstein files: Breaking down the GOP government shutdown
<https://therealnews.com/breaking-down-the-gop-government-shutdown>

would create other problems due to their sizable cost. They viewed the Democrats' healthcare demands—which could cost up to \$1.4 trillion—as “extortion” rather than reasonable negotiation. House Appropriations Committee Chair Tom Cole stated that Democrats were “demanding extraneous provisions and more than \$1 trillion in new spending for just four weeks of government funding.” Republicans insisted that healthcare policy debates should happen separately from basic government funding decisions.¹⁵

The disagreement extended beyond the ACA subsidies. Republicans proposed up to \$2.3 trillion in Medicaid cuts over ten years. Democrats warned these cuts would force states to either eliminate coverage for millions or slash their budgets for schools and other essential services, since Medicaid represents more than half of all federal funding that states receive.¹⁶

This standoff reflected a deeper philosophical divide. Vice President J.D. Vance accused Democrats of putting “a gun to the American people’s heads” by refusing to fund the government without healthcare provisions. Democrats countered that Republicans were willing to let the government shut down rather than help ordinary families afford medical care.¹⁷

The political stakes are high. Both parties remembered the 1995–1996 shutdown, when President Clinton successfully blamed Republicans and won re-election. Neither side wanted to appear responsible for disrupting government services, yet neither would

¹⁵ [Trump Administration Prepares for Mass Layoffs if Government Shuts Down](https://headlineusa.com/trump-administration-prepares-for-mass-layoffs-if-government-shuts-down/)
<https://headlineusa.com/trump-administration-prepares-for-mass-layoffs-if-government-shuts-down/>

¹⁶ [The Urgent Healthcare Crisis at the Heart of the Government Shutdown](https://inthesetimes.com/article/healthcare-crisis-government-shutdown-medicaid-one-big-beautiful-bill)
<https://inthesetimes.com/article/healthcare-crisis-government-shutdown-medicaid-one-big-beautiful-bill>

¹⁷ [WATCH: No Deal in Talks to Avoid Shutdown as Parties Blame Each Other](https://headlineusa.com/watch-no-deal-in-talks-to-avoid-shutdown-as-parties-blame-each-other/)
<https://headlineusa.com/watch-no-deal-in-talks-to-avoid-shutdown-as-parties-blame-each-other/>

compromise. As negotiations dragged on, hundreds of thousands of federal workers faced potential furloughs, and essential services hung in the balance.^{18 19}

Federal Workers Were Furloughed or Required to Work Without Pay During the Shutdown

During a government shutdown, approximately 2.7 million civilian federal employees face an impossible choice they never made themselves: work without receiving a paycheck or stay home without pay. This has happened twelve times since 1981.²⁰

Federal workers are divided into two categories during shutdowns. “Essential” employees—those in jobs deemed necessary to protect life or property—must continue reporting to work even though they won’t see a paycheck until the government reopens. This includes TSA agents screening passengers at airports, Secret Service agents, Border Patrol officers, prison guards, and FBI agents investigating crimes. These Americans are legally required to show up for demanding, often dangerous jobs while worrying about how to pay rent, buy groceries, or afford childcare. “Non-essential” workers, which can include roles such as food safety inspectors, scientists researching disease outbreaks at the CDC, employees processing passport applications, park rangers, and staff helping veterans access their benefits, are

¹⁸ Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

¹⁹ WATCH: No Deal in Talks to Avoid Shutdown as Parties Blame Each Other
<https://headlineusa.com/watch-no-deal-in-talks-to-avoid-shutdown-as-parties-blame-each-other/>

²⁰ ICE, Border Patrol Continue Work Under Shutdown
<https://www.kenklippenstein.com/p/ice-border-patrol-continue-work-under>

furloughed—meaning they are sent home without pay and forbidden from working.



A sign at the entrance to the U.S. Botanic Garden saying that it is closed due to a lapse in appropriations. 100 Maryland Avenue SW, Washington, DC 20001. October 15, 2025. Photo by G. Edward Johnson.

The financial impact of a shutdown for government employees can be devastating. Many federal workers live paycheck to paycheck, like other Americans. During previous shutdowns, federal employees faced impossible decisions: take out loans, max out credit cards, visit food banks, or skip mortgage payments. Some workers reported choosing between buying medicine and buying food. While Congress has historically passed legislation to provide back pay after shutdowns end, that doesn't help families facing immediate bills.²¹

The psychological toll is equally significant. Federal workers describe feeling like “pawns” in political battles they didn't create. They took jobs to serve their country

²¹ [Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown](https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/)
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

only to find themselves used as bargaining chips. The uncertainty affects their ability to plan their lives, damages morale, and may drive experienced public servants to leave government work entirely.

The Shutdown Had Significant Economic Consequences for Workers and the National Economy

Government shutdowns carry a substantial economic cost that extends far beyond the Capitol building. The 2013 shutdown, which lasted 16 days, demonstrated the severe toll these political standoffs exact on the nation. According to Standard & Poor's, that shutdown removed \$24 billion from the economy and reduced fourth-quarter GDP growth by at least 0.6 percent—roughly equivalent to the entire annual economic output of a state like Vermont disappearing in just over two weeks.

The economic damage extends well beyond federal employees. Private businesses that contract with the government or depend on federal workers as customers suffer significant losses. During shutdowns, small business loan applications stop being processed, mortgage approvals are delayed, and passport and visa processing halts. The travel and tourism industry took a particularly hard hit; during one shutdown, the U.S. Travel Association estimated losses of \$1 billion per week as tourists changed plans to visit national parks, historic sites, and Washington, D.C., where museums like those of the Smithsonian Institution closed their doors.²²

State and local governments also feel the pressure. Many state programs depend on federal funding, and a prolonged shutdown can jeopardize everything from school lunch programs to infrastructure projects. Approximately 29.7 million students nationwide rely on federally funded school meals. Native American communities,

²² 22 States Are in Recession or Heading Toward One. The Shutdown Could Worsen It. <https://truthout.org/articles/22-states-are-in-recession-or-heading-toward-one-the-shutdown-could-worsen-it/>

whose healthcare, schools, and other essential services are funded by the federal government, face particularly dire circumstances during shutdowns.²³

Perhaps most troubling is that these economic consequences can have lasting effects. Economists warn that repeated shutdowns damage America's long-term economic competitiveness by delaying investments in infrastructure, scientific research, and education. They also harm federal recruitment and retention, as talented professionals become reluctant to work for an employer that periodically stops paying them for political reasons.²⁴

Past Government Shutdowns Show a Pattern of Increasing Frequency and Political Weaponization

Government shutdowns were once rare events, but they have become increasingly common tools of political combat. Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti's 1980-1981 legal opinions, codified in the Antideficiency Act, transformed funding disputes from administrative inconveniences into political weapons by establishing that government work must generally cease until Congress agrees to pay for it.

Since 1981, there have been at least twelve government shutdowns, ranging from a single day to 35 days. The pattern reveals an escalating trend: shutdowns are becoming more frequent, longer, and more deliberately weaponized for political gain. The 1995-1996 shutdown lasted 21 days when President Clinton clashed with Republican House Speaker Newt Gingrich over budget priorities. Clinton ultimately won the public relations battle—a lesson both parties remembered.²⁵

²³ [22 States Are in Recession or Heading Toward One. The Shutdown Could Worsen It.](https://truthout.org/articles/22-states-are-in-recession-or-heading-toward-one-the-shutdown-could-worsen-it/)
<https://truthout.org/articles/22-states-are-in-recession-or-heading-toward-one-the-shutdown-could-worsen-it/>

²⁴ [Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown](https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/)
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

²⁵ [More federal layoffs, healthcare cuts, and blocking the Epstein files: Breaking down the GOP government shutdown](https://therealnews.com/breaking-down-the-gop-government-shutdown)
<https://therealnews.com/breaking-down-the-gop-government-shutdown>

Under President Obama, the government shut down in 2013 over disputes regarding funding for the Affordable Care Act, idling 800,000 federal workers for 16 days and costing the economy \$24 billion. During President Trump’s first term, the government shut down three times, including the longest shutdown in American history—35 days from December 2018 to January 2019—over funding for a border wall. Notably, that shutdown occurred despite Republicans controlling both the presidency and Congress, demonstrating how deeply divided the political landscape had become.

In October of 2025, the government shut down again under Trump’s second term. The recurring pattern reveals a troubling truth: government shutdowns are no longer emergency measures of last resort. They have become calculated political strategies, with each party willing to halt government operations to achieve policy goals or embarrass opponents. This transformation represents a fundamental shift in American governance, where the basic function of funding the government has become a battlefield rather than a shared responsibility. ²⁶

The Constitutional System of Checks and Balances Was Tested During This Shutdown

When the Founding Fathers designed the American government in 1787, they intentionally divided power among three branches—legislative, executive, and judicial—to prevent any single person or group from becoming too powerful. They called this system “checks and balances,” and nowhere is it more visible than in how the government gets funded. ²⁷

The Constitution gives Congress the “power of the purse.” Article I grants Congress the exclusive authority to decide how taxpayer money gets spent. As James Madison

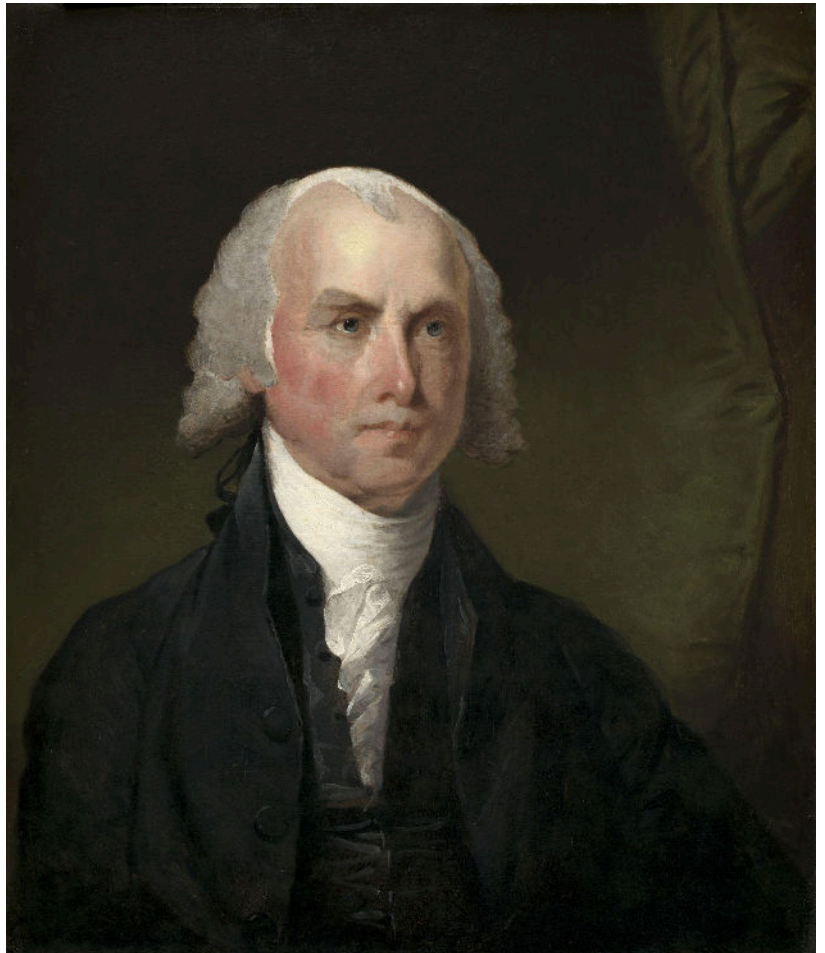
²⁶ Trump Administration Prepares for Mass Layoffs if Government Shuts Down
<https://headlineusa.com/trump-administration-prepares-for-mass-layoffs-if-government-shuts-down/>

²⁷ The Most Dangerous “Invasion” We Face
<https://tenthamentendmentcenter.com/2025/10/05/the-most-dangerous-invasion-we-face/>

(pictured on the next page) wrote in Federalist No. 58, this power is “the most complete and effectual weapon” that citizens’ representatives could have to check executive power. The Founders believed that whoever controls the money controls the government, which is why they wanted elected representatives—not the president—to hold this authority.²⁸

Recent government shutdowns have put this constitutional framework to the test. When Congress and the President disagree on spending priorities, neither side can simply force the other to comply. The president can veto spending bills passed by Congress, but Congress can refuse to fund presidential priorities. This creates a standoff that can lead to a shutdown, where non-essential government operations stop and hundreds of thousands of federal workers go without pay.^{29 30}

These shutdowns expose the tension built into our system.



²⁸ [The Shadow President](https://www.propublica.org/article/russ-vought-trump-shadow-president-omb)
<https://www.propublica.org/article/russ-vought-trump-shadow-president-omb>

²⁹ [Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown](https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/)
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

³⁰ [What the Hell is a Government Shutdown Anyway? The Accounting Gimmicks at the Heart of the Federal Budget](https://www.crisisnotes.com/what-the-hell-is-a-government-shutdown-anyway/)
<https://www.crisisnotes.com/what-the-hell-is-a-government-shutdown-anyway/>

Since the 1980s, shutdowns have occurred under Presidents Clinton, Obama, and Trump—each time because the two branches of government could not agree on budget priorities. These conflicts demonstrate that checks and balances, while preventing tyranny, can also create gridlock.^{31 32}

However, constitutional scholars warn that recent trends have strained this system in troubling ways. Some presidents have attempted to bypass congressional spending authority through executive orders, emergency declarations, or simply refusing to spend money that Congress has appropriated. When presidents “reprogram” funds without congressional approval or shut down agencies that Congress has funded, they may be violating the constitutional separation of powers.³³

The judicial branch should theoretically step in to resolve these disputes. However, judges have been reluctant to intervene in spending battles, often dismissing cases as “political questions” best left to the elected branches. This means that enforcing constitutional boundaries largely depends on Congress and the President respecting the limits of their own power.³⁴

Legal experts like Professor William P. Marshall have warned that “the system of checks and balances that the framers envisioned now lacks effective checks and is no longer in balance.” When one branch repeatedly oversteps its authority and the others fail to push back, the carefully calibrated system begins to break down. This is precisely what the Founders feared and why they believed that preserving the

³¹ [Government Shutdown and Free Speech Showdown](https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/)
<https://theintercept.com/2025/10/02/podcast-government-shutdown-free-speech/>

³² [What the Hell is a Government Shutdown Anyway? The Accounting Gimmicks at the Heart of the Federal Budget](https://www.crisisnotes.com/what-the-hell-is-a-government-shutdown-anyway/)
<https://www.crisisnotes.com/what-the-hell-is-a-government-shutdown-anyway/>

³³ [The Shadow President](https://www.propublica.org/article/russ-vought-trump-shadow-president-omb)
<https://www.propublica.org/article/russ-vought-trump-shadow-president-omb>

³⁴ [In 20th Win - SCOTUS Lets Trump Withhold \\$4 Billion In Foreign Aid](https://www.zerohedge.com/political/20th-win-scotus-lets-trump-withhold-4-billion-foreign-aid)
<https://www.zerohedge.com/political/20th-win-scotus-lets-trump-withhold-4-billion-foreign-aid>

separation of powers was essential to maintaining both liberty and effective government.^{35 36}

The lesson from recent shutdowns is clear: our constitutional system was designed to make governing difficult when there's disagreement, forcing compromise rather than allowing unilateral action. While frustrating, this is a feature of our democracy, not a bug. The question facing Americans today is whether this system of checks and balances will continue to constrain power—or whether one branch will succeed in concentrating too much authority in its own hands.

³⁵ Authoritarian America

<https://www.counterpunch.org/2025/10/17/authoritarian-america/>

³⁶ Trump's Everywhere War: An Insurrection Against the Constitution

<https://off-guardian.org/2025/10/13/trumps-everywhere-war-an-insurrection-against-the-constitution/>

Glossary

A

Affordable Care Act (ACA) - A federal law passed in 2010 that created a marketplace where Americans can purchase health insurance, often with government subsidies to help reduce costs. Also known as "Obamacare."

Antideficiency Act - A federal law that prohibits the government from spending money that Congress has not appropriated, which forms the legal basis for government shutdowns when funding runs out.

Appropriations Bills - The twelve separate pieces of legislation that Congress must pass each year to fund different parts of the federal government, from military operations to national parks.

B

Budget Authorization - A framework created by Congress that serves as a spending plan before the detailed appropriations bills are written.

Brinkmanship - A political strategy where parties push a dangerous situation (like a government shutdown) to the very edge to try to force the other side to give in to their demands.

C

Checks and Balances - The constitutional system that divides government power among three branches (legislative, executive, judicial) so that each can limit the power of the others, preventing any single branch from becoming too powerful.

Continuing Resolution (CR) - A temporary funding measure that keeps the government operating by essentially copying the previous year's budget with minor changes, used when Congress cannot pass regular appropriations bills on time.

E

Essential Employees - Federal workers who must continue working during a government shutdown because their jobs are deemed necessary to protect life or property, even though they don't receive paychecks until the shutdown ends.

F

Fiscal Year - The government's budget year, which runs from October 1st to September 30th of the following year.

Furlough - When government employees are temporarily sent home without pay during a shutdown and are legally forbidden from working.

G

GDP (Gross Domestic Product) - The total value of all goods and services produced in a country, used as a measure of economic health.

Government Shutdown - When federal government operations stop because Congress and the President cannot agree on funding, causing many services to halt and federal workers to go without pay.

M

Medicaid - A government program that provides healthcare coverage to low-income families, funded jointly by federal and state governments.

N

Non-essential Workers - Federal employees who are sent home (furloughed) during government shutdowns because their jobs are not considered immediately necessary to protect life or property.

P

Power of the Purse - The constitutional authority given exclusively to Congress to decide how government money is spent, considered one of the most important checks on presidential power.

Project 2025 - A blueprint for restructuring the federal government mentioned in the readings as influencing shutdown strategy.

S

Separation of Powers - The constitutional principle that divides government authority among the legislative branch (Congress), executive branch (President), and judicial branch (courts) to prevent the concentration of power.

Subsidies - Government financial assistance to help people afford something, such as tax credits that reduce the cost of health insurance premiums.

V

Veto - The president's constitutional power to reject legislation passed by Congress, which can be overridden only by a two-thirds vote in both houses of Congress.

Critical Thinking Questions: When Politics Stops Government

Question 1

Before 1981, government funding gaps didn't result in shutdowns—agencies just operated normally. Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti changed this with legal opinions requiring work to stop without funding. Do you think this change made American government better or worse? Explain your reasoning.

Question 2

The reading concludes that our system of checks and balances was "designed to make governing difficult when there's disagreement, forcing compromise rather than allowing unilateral action." Do you think this is still working as intended, or has something fundamental changed about how American government operates?

Question 3

Based on everything you've read, what reforms (if any) would you propose to prevent or minimize future government shutdowns? Consider both the practical and constitutional aspects of your suggestions.

Government Shutdowns Quiz

Instructions: Choose the best answer for each question. Refer back to the readings as needed to find supporting information.

Questions

1. According to the Constitution, which branch of government has the "power of the purse"?

- a) The Executive Branch (President)
- b) The Judicial Branch (Supreme Court)
- c) The Legislative Branch (Congress)
- d) State governments

2. How many appropriations bills is Congress supposed to pass each year to fund the federal government?

- a) Eight
- b) Ten
- c) Twelve
- d) Fifteen

3. What legal change made government shutdowns possible starting in 1981?

- a) A Supreme Court ruling on federal spending
- b) Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti's legal opinions
- c) The creation of the Office of Management and Budget
- d) A constitutional amendment about government funding

4. During the 2025 shutdown described in the reading, approximately how many federal employees were targeted for firing across seven major departments?

- a) Over 2,000
- b) Over 4,000
- c) Over 6,000
- d) Over 8,000

5. What are "continuing resolutions" (CRs)?

- a) Permanent budget solutions that last multiple years
- b) Emergency funding only for military operations
- c) Temporary measures that copy last year's budget with minor adjustments
- d) Constitutional requirements for government spending

6. How much did the 2013 government shutdown remove from the U.S. economy according to Standard & Poor's?

- a) \$12 billion
- b) \$18 billion
- c) \$24 billion
- d) \$35 billion

7. During a shutdown, "essential" federal employees must:

- a) Stay home without pay
- b) Work from home with full pay
- c) Continue working without receiving paychecks
- d) Take unpaid vacation days

8. In Federalist No. 58, James Madison described the power of the purse as:

- a) "A necessary evil in democratic government"
- b) "The foundation of all governmental authority"
- c) "The most complete and effectual weapon" for representatives
- d) "A shared responsibility between all branches"

Answer Key

1. **c) The Legislative Branch (Congress)** - The Constitution grants Congress the "power of the purse," meaning no money can be spent without Congressional approval.
2. **c) Twelve** - Every year, Congress faces the responsibility of passing twelve separate appropriations bills to fund the federal government.
3. **b) Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti's legal opinions** - Before 1981, funding gaps didn't result in shutdowns, but Civiletti's legal opinions established that government work must generally cease until Congress agrees to pay for it.
4. **b) Over 4,000** - By late Friday of the shutdown's first week, the administration had targeted over 4,000 employees across seven major federal departments.
5. **c) Temporary measures that copy last year's budget with minor adjustments** - CRs are temporary measures that simply copy last year's budget with minor adjustments and extend the deadline.
6. **c) \$24 billion** - According to Standard & Poor's, the 2013 shutdown removed \$24 billion from the economy.
7. **c) Continue working without receiving paychecks** - "Essential" employees must continue reporting to work even though they won't see a paycheck until the government reopens.
8. **c) "The most complete and effectual weapon" for representatives** - Madison wrote that the power of the purse is "the most complete and effectual weapon" that citizens' representatives could have to check executive power.