Government shutdowns 101: FAQs

What is a government shutdown?
Each year, Congress must approve appropriations to fund government agencies and programs for the next fiscal year. When Congress does not enact the bills, federal agencies must pause their services and operations, resulting in a government shutdown.

The House and Senate each have 12 appropriations subcommittees that craft the spending packages, organized around programmatic areas such as defense, agriculture, transportation and more. The bills that come out of the 12 committees may be passed as stand-alone bills, but in recent years they have frequently been wrapped into an “omnibus” appropriations bill to fund the whole government.

What happens if Congress passes only some of the 12 appropriations bills?
A partial shutdown occurs. Programs funded by the appropriations bills continue while those left unfunded stop.

Has Congress passed any of the appropriations bills required to fund the government in fiscal year 2024?
No. The House Appropriations Committee has approved 10 of 12 bills, and the full House has passed one, the funding bill for military construction and veteran affairs. Before the August recess, the Senate Appropriations Committee approved all 12 appropriations bills for the full Senate to consider, in line with the spending caps outlined in the bipartisan compromise on the debt limit developed earlier this year.

Many in the House, however, want to cut agency budgets by a much greater margin than what was outlined in the debt deal and have written bills that include policy riders sure to spark extended debate and negotiations, including ones that seek to return telework policies to pre-pandemic levels and another that seeks to defund diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

When is the deadline to agree on the 12 appropriations bills or pass a stopgap spending measure?

Has a government shutdown happened before?
Yes. Since 1976, our government has shut down (partially or fully) 21 times for at least a day, including the longest shutdown in U.S. history of 35 days in 2018-2019.

Would a shutdown stop all federal programs and spending?
No. Funding allocated for federal agencies and programs through the appropriations process typically makes up only approximately one-third of the federal budget. Mandatory spending not subject to the appropriations process, such as Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and the U.S. Postal Service, would continue, as would many essential services outlined in agency shutdown plans in coordination with the Office of Management and Budget. During past shutdowns, services that continued included air traffic control, in-hospital medical care, border protection and more.
**What services would be affected?**
A vast array of government services important to the American public and our economy. During past shutdowns, the Food and Drug Administration delayed its food inspections, the Environmental Protection Agency delayed its hazardous waste and drinking water site inspections, and national parks were closed. Food stamp benefits have also previously been at risk for shutdowns lasting longer than 30 days. Other functions, including small business loans, processing and citizenship passport applications, National Institutes of Health research, could also be affected. The Office of Management and Budget has posted contingency plans that each agency has created to prepare for a potential shutdown.

**How would federal employees be affected?**
Generally, employees at federal agencies are furloughed without pay (though 2019 legislation guarantees them back pay when the shutdown ends). Other employees who perform “excepted” activities continue to work, but still do not get paid during the shutdown. Excepted government functions include those necessary to protect against imminent threats to safety or property.

During the last government shutdown in 2018-19, an estimated 380,000 employees were furloughed and another 420,000 had to work without pay, hurting morale and reducing service to the public. For example, during the 2018-2019 shutdown, Transportation Security Administration agents and air traffic controllers forced to stay on the job without pay called out of work, leaving travelers facing delays and longer lines.

**Could agencies call furloughed employees back to the office if situations arise that would make their work “excepted”?**
Yes. During the last prolonged shutdown, the IRS, Food and Drug Administration and Federal Aviation Administration recalled employees to help their agencies perform critical services, such as food inspections and assisting with tax filing processes. Some agencies are planning to take similar actions to manage another potentially long shutdown.

**Does a shutdown save the government money?**
No. On the contrary, shutdowns waste taxpayer money due to the cost of devising contingency plans to manage a shutdown. Agencies also lose out on revenue from service fees and sometimes face higher premiums from contractors who are unsure whether they will be paid on time.

Surveying 26 federal agencies, not including several Cabinet-level ones, a Senate subcommittee found that the last three government shutdowns—in 2013, 2018 and 2018-2019—cost taxpayers nearly $4 billion, $3.7 billion in back pay to furlough workers and another nearly $340 million in lost revenue and extra administrative work.

The cost to the economy is also significant. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that the 2018-2019 shutdown lowered Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by $11 billion.

**What happens to Congress during a shutdown?**
Members of Congress are not subject to furlough. Staffers “required to support Congress with its constitutional responsibilities or those necessary to protect life and property” remain on the job but do not get paid.
What is a continuing resolution?
A continuing resolution provides temporary funding, generally frozen at existing levels, to continue federal programs and activities in the absence of full appropriations bills. Congress may adopt “anomalies” to existing levels for some programs—disaster relief, for example—to address urgent concerns during the period of a continuing resolution.

What are the pros and cons of continuing resolutions?
Continuing resolutions give lawmakers more time to enact appropriations bills and keep the government open. However, because they offer only temporary funding, they do not provide agencies with the financial stability to make long-term, strategic decisions that are necessary for innovation and better service on behalf of the people. In addition, continuing resolutions prohibit new activities not funded during the previous fiscal year from starting. Congress has passed an average of five continuing resolutions each year since 1998, making it difficult for agencies to rely on steady funding.

What is Congress doing to try and reduce the number of shutdowns in the long term?
Earlier this year, a bill introduced by Sens. James Lankford and Maggie Hassan, the Prevent Government Shutdown Act of 2023, would automatically enact continuing resolutions when Congress cannot reach an agreement on spending. It would also restrict Congress from considering other matters and prohibit almost all travel for lawmakers and their staff members until a full appropriations package is agreed on. Sen. Tim Kaine and Rep. Don Beyer have proposed similar legislation.