



**PARTNERSHIP
FOR PUBLIC SERVICE**

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 enacted appropriations bills continue while those left unfunded stop.

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—that include additional funds to address urgent concerns during the period of a continuing resolution.

Can Congress pass another continuing resolution to keep the government open?

Yes, but that approach comes with drawbacks. Continuing resolutions offer only temporary funding and fail to 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 at least [two](#) continuing resolutions each year since 1998, making it difficult for agencies to rely on steady funding.

When is the deadline to avoid a government shutdown?

Congress has until midnight on Tuesday, Sept. 30, 2025, to pass a spending bill to avoid a government shutdown.

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](#).

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. While reports suggest a shutdown would not [trigger a recession](#), the [Congressional Budget Office estimated](#) that the 2018-2019 shutdown lowered the Gross Domestic Product by \$11 billion. In 2023, Moody's also warned that a shutdown could [downgrade the U.S. credit rating](#), which assesses the safety of investing in government bonds, if the government shut down.

Would a shutdown stop all federal programs and spending?

No. Funding allocated for federal agencies and programs through the appropriations process makes up less than 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, continues, as do many exempt 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.

Which services could be affected?

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.

For past shutdowns, the Office of Management and Budget has posted [contingency plans](#) that highlight what agency activities will continue in the event of a shutdown.

What is different about a shutdown in 2025?

A government shutdown this year would pale in comparison to shutdowns of the past because of the services that have already been decimated by haphazard workforce cuts. The latest threat comes in the midst of a de facto government shutdown, with the Trump administration arbitrarily firing hundreds of thousands of civil servants, unilaterally freezing congressionally approved funding, failing to enforce laws and effectively sabotaging the work at agencies dealing with everything from public health and education to consumer protection, foreign aid, law enforcement and scientific research.

If a spending deal is not reached, the Trump administration will have enormous latitude to determine which government services, programs and agencies to keep open or shut down, decisions that could go far beyond what has occurred during past shutdowns. President Trump could easily use a shutdown to further dismantle government services, continue removing employees on the “non-exempt” lists and further alter the balance of power between Congress and the White House.

How would a shutdown affect federal employees?

Generally, employees at federal agencies are furloughed without pay. While [legislation passed in 2019](#) guarantees them back pay when the shutdown ends, this immediate lack of income can cause significant financial hardship and may be particularly challenging for military personnel who might experience disruptions in on-base services like child care, commissaries and healthcare. Other employees who perform “excepted” activities or who are funded by sources other than annual appropriations 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.

Could agencies call furloughed employees back to work if situations arise that would make their work “excepted”?

Yes. During the 2018-2019 shutdown, the IRS, the Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration [recalled employees](#) to help their agencies perform critical services, such as food inspections and assisting with tax filing processes. Some agencies plan to [take similar actions](#) to manage another long shutdown.

What happens to Congress during a shutdown?

Members of Congress are not subject to furlough and they continue to be paid during a shutdown. Staff “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](#). This gap in pay puts a serious financial strain on congressional staff, with [one 2020 study](#) noting that 1 in 8, or nearly 1,200, do not make a living wage. In previous shutdowns, lawmakers have decided [which of their staff to furlough](#).

In the House, offices determined to be unrelated to the protection of human life or property, or constitutional responsibilities, [close](#), including most dining facilities, the staff gym, gift shops and more. Some of these services rely on contracted employees who could be out of work with no guarantee of back pay. Certain types of federally funded travel is also prohibited, however lawmakers are still permitted to travel to and from their districts.

What happens to the White House during a shutdown?

According to [2023 reporting](#), White House senior aides would not be furloughed during a shutdown. In the past, employees with the title “Special Assistant to the President” have remained on the job.



What is Congress doing to reduce the number of shutdowns in the long term?

Several members of Congress have [introduced legislation](#) that would automatically enact continuing resolutions when Congress and the president cannot reach an agreement on spending. None of these proposals have seen recent success in advancing through the legislative process.