

Learning about Legislation #17 - Government Shutdowns

As of this writing, a government shutdown is in effect. But just what is a government shutdown? Which services are unavailable at this time, and which continue? And what is the history of such shutdowns?

The [Washington Post](#) has a detailed article on which processes are affected during a shutdown. They broke down government services and processes into five categories:

1. **Benefits** — Most benefit programs are funded outside of this kind of bill, so Social Security, unemployment, food stamps and the like will still make payments. Applying for those programs will be suspended, as the staff to process applications will not be present. Similarly, payments to Medicare and Medicaid providers may be delayed.
2. **Facilities** — Local libraries, schools and parks are funded by states and municipalities, so they are unaffected. Federal prisons remain open, as does Congress, though some low-level Congressional staffers may not be paid. The federal courts have funding to stay open for three weeks after a shutdown is initiated, so they will stay open if the shutdown is short. However, almost all federal office buildings and federal agencies will be closed. You will not be able to call up the Social Security Administration or Internal Revenue Service to ask questions or get assistance during this time.
3. **Recreation** — The *Washington Post* reports, “Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney declared the parks will stay open during a shutdown at Friday’s White House news briefing. But on Saturday the Statue of Liberty and roughly a third of other NPS sites closed.” Most national museums will close as of Monday.
4. **Travel and Shipping** — The US Postal Service and Transportation Security Administration (TSA) will be unaffected by the shutdown, but passport offices that are located in federal buildings will be closed. Amtrak has the funding to maintain normal operations for a “short-term” shutdown, but it is uncertain what will happen if this extends beyond a few weeks.
5. **Other** — Government research projects, including those related to climate change, will stop during the shutdown, as will disaster recovery efforts. Military operations will be affected, as some training exercises would cease, though active-duty troops will still be working. Food inspection will continue, as will federal educational financial aid. And perhaps most importantly to many of us, Special counsel Mueller’s Russia investigation will continue throughout the shutdown.

The policy wonk website [Vox](#) (which I recommend highly - kpz) lists 20 government shutdowns since 1976, when the modern budgeting process commenced. Vox notes that the first 6 of those events are not similar to what we experience today, as no services actually shut down. During those first 6 events, the government continued to perform as before, but without official funding. Some [historians](#) refer to these 6 as “funding gaps” and not real shutdowns.

The first shutdown of the federal government occurred in 1981, during Reagan’s presidency, when the House was under Democratic control, but the Senate was in the hands of the GOP. President Reagan wanted \$8.4 billion in domestic spending reductions. When a deal was reached that was \$2 billion short of what he wanted, he vetoed the spending bill on the table and caused a 3-day shut down. Most of the 7 other shutdowns during the Reagan era lasted between 3 – 5 days. They were caused by issues as varied as missile funding, a crime bill, oil and gas drilling on federal wildlife refuges, and supporting the Contras in Nicaragua. The most amazing of those shutdown causes is so unbelievable that I will quote Vox directly. They report:

“...this one literally happened because Reagan and Congress had social engagements and forgot to keep funds flowing in the meantime... [excerpted from a contemporary *New York Times* article] Congressional leaders barred a late-night session because of major social events tonight by both Republicans and Democrats. President Reagan invited all members of Congress to a barbecue at the White House, while Democrats were having a \$1,000-a-plate fund-raising dinner.”

Almost every other President since Reagan has experienced a shutdown, with the exception of President George W. Bush. The longest shutdown occurred from 12/05/95 through 01/06/96, under President Clinton. The same Vox article explains, "This shutdown, which lasted the better part of a month, was all about whether to use economic forecasts from the Congressional Budget Office or the Office of Management and Budget to determine whether the White House's budget plan would balance. The CBO was more cautious, and projected that Clinton would still have a \$115 billion deficit in seven years under his plan. Republicans eventually caved after 21 days, and Clinton then proposed a plan that the CBO agreed balanced the budget. Some 284,000 workers were furloughed in the longest shutdown in history."

History shows us that most shutdowns don't very long, but they cause major disruptions for the country. Of course, federal workers are affected, but so are businesses that rely on the government, people who need information about government-provided services, and participants in federal programs who will receive delayed payments. Let's hope this gets resolved quickly!