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Government Shutdowns

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Introduction

Article I, Section 7 of the Constitution of the United States reads, "All Bills for raising Revenue shall originate in the House of Representatives." Article I, Section 8 continues to name the powers of Congress, most essentially, "to lay and collect taxes... to borrow Money... and to coin Money." In the United States, the power of the purse resolutely rests in the legislature's hands, but this power does not come without restraint. The final clause of Article I, Section 9 states, "No money shall be drawn from the Treasury, but in Consequence of Appropriations made by Law." As such, Congress must annually submit appropriations bills prior to the beginning of each fiscal year in order to provide funds for all government operations. But what happens when Congress neglects that duty?

Question 1: What is a government shutdown?

Government shutdowns occur when Congress does not provide appropriations bills to fund spending between federal departments and government programs. A government shutdown has a wide-reaching impact on the nearly two million government employees and an additional two million or more active military servants who rely on government funds for their paychecks. Some employees, such as public safety and law enforcement agents, continue their work through the shutdown, as their work is deemed essential to the operation of the federal government. The rest of these employees are furloughed during the shutdown. During the furlough period, nonessential government employees are suspended from their usual work activities until the funding dispute is resolved. Workers receive backpay from their temporary leave once Congress passes legislation to fund the government again.

Since 1977, the US federal government has encountered several funding gaps and shutdowns. The impact of these shutdowns has increased in magnitude and duration, with a significant spike occurring from December 1995 into January 1996 when a twenty-one-day shutdown ensued. Prior to this instance, most shutdowns lasted only a span of a few days. While shutdowns have proven less frequent since the turn of the millennium, new instances of government shutdowns in the US have proven consequential. The most recent shutdown from December 2018 into January 2019 lasted a record thirty-four days. With thousands of government employees furloughed for over a month, failing to prevent shutdowns can prove costly in the ballpark of billions of dollars in the long run.

Question 2: How does a government shutdown affect the public?

A shutdown would impact far more than just government employees, as government funding is apportioned to more than just the paychecks of its employees. Prolonged shutdowns could introduce a period of temporary instability for the American public, especially low-income citizens. Members of the public who receive compensation from benefit programs like Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, and military veterans would continue to get their payments, but delays may become applicable to some beneficiaries. People receiving nutrition benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program would be affected by a long-term shutdown, as the program would not be able to persist a month's duration for the number of beneficiaries relying upon the program. Similarly, free lunch programs, like Head Start, lose federal funding during a shutdown.

Beyond federal benefit programs, transportation and travel could be challenged by a government shutdown. Infrastructure programs could be halted without necessary reviews and oversight. Airports would continue work as an essential service provider, but delays would likely ensue from workers calling off and trainees being furloughed. US National Parks and federal monuments would be closed to the public. Museums and other government-funded public attractions would only be functional for a few days before being closed for the rest of the duration of the shutdown. Furthermore, backpaying furloughed employees and pausing work in important sectors of American society could result in additional economic consequences during the shutdown and beyond.

Question 3: How does the federal government avoid a shutdown?

In order to avoid a shutdown, Congress must pass an appropriations bill. There are several ways that Congress can accomplish this, but the most effective way to fund the government for the next fiscal year comes when Congress passes a series of twelve regular appropriations bills. Regular appropriations bills function as a general fund across several accounts for specific government departments and agencies. Funds within these accounts cannot transfer money into any other account without congressional approval. Agencies can reprogram funds when reallocating funds to new activities under the jurisdiction of the same accounts, but the Congressional Appropriations Subcommittee retains the ability to monitor how funds are reallocated within the accounts. The issue with regular appropriations bills comes at the negotiation table. Oftentimes, Congress will seek to combine several of the regular spending bills that may face scrutiny into an omnibus spending bill. By lumping so many bills together, an omnibus bill enshrines several important measures for the basic functions of governing, but opportune legislators can use them as a means of pork-barreling. With so many important measures sealed within the texts of the proposed bills, rejecting the collective bills outright for a particular policy disagreement can prove costly. By consolidating a mass of important funding under an omnibus bill, legislators can essentially "veto-proof" particularly controversial measures within the vital collective work of the bill. Bipartisan consensus can often prove time-consuming when deciding on twelve different spending bills, so elected officials look for alternative

approaches to accelerate funding negotiations to continue government operations without losing their policy goals.

Continuing resolutions are appropriations bills that allow Congress to fund government activities for a limited time. They are often used when approaching the October 1st appropriations deadline to avoid a partial government shutdown until all twelve appropriations bills can create a comprehensive funding plan for the next fiscal year. Continuing resolutions can be a great tool for improvising amidst deadlocks, but they are hardly a resolute long-term solution for government funding. They provide more time for parties to take the time necessary to settle disputes and formulate better legislation, but agencies may find themselves faced with unfortunate consequences under the administration of these temporary bills. Some agencies must disrupt normal operations, abandon projects and programs, and divert attention from these activities solely to vital functions when their budget under continuing resolution does not match their anticipated funding. In addition to regular appropriations bills and continuing resolutions, Congress will pass supplemental appropriations for unexpected circumstances and emergency scenarios. Supplemental appropriation bills tend to pertain solely to wartime expenditures, emergency disaster relief, and recovery from such events.

Conclusion

In order for the federal government to provide its services to the American people, it must provide itself the resources necessary to achieve those ends. Congress holds the power of the purse and that power needs to be wielded with public service in mind. Balancing the budget proves difficult when governance encompasses many aspects of daily life, but this task is dutifully bestowed upon our legislators for a reason. They are representatives for the voice of the American people, and that voice should resonate from their actions.