

The longest ever US government shutdown

Emma Kilheeney McSherry examines the reasons why shutdown can occur



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On 13 November 2025, the longest ever government shutdown came to an end on the forty-third day, after 42 full days without the US government being funded. The USA, unlike other democracies, has no mechanism in place to fund government workers and services if the annual budget cannot be agreed, and this is why shutdown can occur. It was the first government shutdown since January 2019, and the fourth during President Trump's time as president. No government shutdowns occurred during the presidencies of George W. Bush or Joe Biden.

Most shutdowns are resolved within days, or even overnight, but a few have lasted much longer (Table 1).

Why does shutdown occur?

The federal government can only spend money approved – via spending bills called **appropriations** – by Congress. If funding cannot be agreed at the end of the fiscal year, then federal agencies are prohibited from spending any additional funds until a new

appropriations funding law is agreed by Congress. Until such agreement can be reached, the government goes into shutdown.

In the Senate, the support of 60 senators is required to avoid the threat of the filibuster. This is because appropriations bills, under Senate rules, are designed to prevent the president's party getting its agenda passed without some input from the minority party.

What led to the 2025 shutdown?

In 2025, there were 53 Republicans in the Senate, with Republican Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) opposing the funding bill. This meant, to avoid the filibuster, that eight Democratic or Independent senators needed to vote with the Republicans. Only three of them – Senate Democrats Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV) and John Fetterman (D-PA), and Independent Senator Angus King (I-ME) – supported the bill, which was not enough to reach the 60-senator threshold. This meant that until five more senators agreed to support it, the government would remain in shutdown.

Table 1 Duration of government shutdowns

Year shutdown began	Month shutdown began	President	Number of full days in shutdown
2025	October	Trump	42
2018	December	Trump	34
1995	December	Clinton	21
2013	September	Obama	16
1995	November	Clinton	5
2018	January	Trump	3
1990	October	G.H.W. Bush	3
1983	November	Reagan	3
1982	December	Reagan	3

Most Democrat senators refused to support the Republican funding bill unless the Republicans agreed to extend the Affordable Care Act health insurance subsidies, which were due to expire at the beginning of November. Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which passed earlier in 2025, included \$1 trillion in cuts to healthcare, affecting over 3.8 million Americans, and Democrats wanted this to be reversed.

What happens during a shutdown?

Only federal work vital to national security continues and many workers are not paid. It was agreed in 2025 that members of the military would continue to receive pay after President Trump used leftover funding to pay them. However, food stamps – funded via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – were not issued to the 42 million Americans that rely on food subsidies. In addition, thousands of flights were cancelled because air traffic controllers and airport security staff were not working.

In September, Adelita Grijalva (D-AZ) won a special election but was prevented from being sworn in as a Representative in Congress until the shutdown ended. This was because the Speaker of the House of Representatives Mike Johnson (R-LA) placed the House into recess, once the House had passed its funding bill, while waiting for the Senate to pass theirs. The House of Representatives ended up being in recess for 54 days. Grijalva was eventually sworn into Congress 50 days after winning the special election, enabling the 813,000 voters in District 7 in Arizona to have an elected Representative.

How and why did it end?

Democratic senators realised that the Republicans were not going to compromise on extending

healthcare subsidies until the shutdown ended. On 13 November Dick Durbin (D-IL), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Jacky Rosen (D-NV), Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-NH), who had all previously opposed a deal with the Republicans, decided to support it in exchange for SNAP food subsidies restarting. The Senate Majority Leader John Thune (R-SD) then agreed to hold a vote in December on extending healthcare subsidies. These additional five Democratic senator votes enabled the 60-senator threshold to be met.

The continuing resolution funding bill went to the House of Representatives to be agreed, passing 222–209, and was then signed into law by President Trump. This brought government shutdown to an end after a record-breaking 43 days. The passing of the three appropriations bills will fund the government throughout Thanksgiving and Christmas, until 30 January 2026.

Task

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