

Research



The Policy and Politics of the Government Shutdowns in 1995-1996

GORDON GRAY | SEPTEMBER 27, 2013

Some members of Congress have threatened to withhold support for an annual spending agreement unless the agreement also withholds funding from the Affordable Care Act (ACA) or Obamacare. If annual spending measures are not enacted by October 1st, a government shutdown would occur. Many major functions of the government will be interrupted and hundreds of thousands of federal employees would be faced with furlough. [\[1\]](#)

THE POLICY

First, it is important to note several flaws with the underlying policy of this pursuit. A federal shutdown does not affect mandatory spending. Mostly comprised of entitlement or benefit programs such as Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, and now many major elements of Obamacare, mandatory spending is the largest component of federal spending. Even ongoing Obamacare implementation efforts pursued by agencies that would otherwise face defunding and furloughs are insulated during a shutdown. [\[2\]](#) On this basis, a shutdown is a poor mechanism for attempting to defund Obamacare.

Perhaps the threat of a government shutdown is perceived as a form of leverage to pursue defunding Obamacare through amendment of the underlying ACA itself or some other change in law to accomplish the same goal. However, for this to be the case, Democrats must perceive themselves as being disadvantaged politically if a shutdown occurs. This appears unlikely, if past experience is any guide.

The mid 1990's saw two government shutdowns: one beginning on Monday, November 13, 1995 and ending on Sunday, November 19, 1995; and the other beginning on Friday, December 15, 1995 and ending on Saturday, January 6, 1996. Importantly an appropriations bill for the Department of Defense had already been enacted during the second shutdown, which precluded interruptions in pay to members of the armed forces which would now occur if the government were to shut down on October 1st.

THE POLITICS

Key leaders in the effort to defund Obamacare at the risk of a government shutdown cast the fight as a “matter of principle.” [\[3\]](#) However, if the shutdowns of the mid-1990's are any indication, this is not a winning argument. Indeed in November of 1995, a Gallop poll indicated that the majority of those polled believed the budget battle was about political advantage (52 percent) rather than principles (37 percent). [\[4\]](#) Another poll by NBC taken during the second shutdown saw this dynamic amplified: with only 17 percent believing the fight was over policy principles compared with 76 percent believing the fight was political.

This should be particularly worrisome insofar as the public may be otherwise sympathetic to the policy

principles being pursued by Republicans. A Pew poll taken in January of 1996 showed that 62 percent of Americans thought a balanced budget was very important, and that if a balanced budget were to be achieved, 47 percent believed that Republicans in Congress deserved the credit versus 31 percent for Clinton. 52 percent of those polled in an ABC News/Washington Post poll in January of 1996 stated that a balanced budget was more important than providing the current level of government services, a viewpoint supported by 41 percent of those polled. Moreover, Republicans could point to how detached most Americans are from the federal budget. Indeed, according to a CBS poll in November of 1995, only 11 percent of Americans were affected by the shutdown. Republicans were winning the policy argument.

But Republicans were losing the political one. Despite identification with specific policy objectives pursued by Republicans, more Americans more closely identified with Clinton's approach to the federal budget than Republicans' (48 percent v. 42 percent) according to the Pew Poll. And on tactics, a shutdown was viewed by 75 percent of Americans as a "bad thing" in the ABC News/Washington Post poll from January of 1996, despite the fact that 50 percent of Americans agreed with the idea that the shutdown proved that many government services were not essential and could be cut, according to the same poll.

Ultimately, Republicans lost the political battle by employing a tactic that was a bridge too far. Despite the fact that the shutdown in substance was not particularly important to Americans, it was important politically, and allowed President Clinton to paint Republicans as stubborn and more effectively fix blame. Throughout the shutdown battles, polls routinely showed Republicans were to blame for the shutdown. In a November Gallop poll, 22 percent of Americans approved while 64 percent disapproved of Newt Gingrich's approach to the budget battle, compared with 32 percent disapproval and 52 percent approval for Clinton. By a January ABC News/Washington Post poll, Clinton's numbers were similar at 46 disapproval and 50 percent approval, while the perception of the Republican approach had worsened to 74 percent against compared to 22 percent in favor.

Republicans handily lost the political fight. However, as noted by Public Opinion Strategies, the world essentially moves on.^[5] To be sure, the Republicans saw losses in the 1996 election but they maintained control of the House. The lesson to be learned for Republicans is that in a shutdown fight, the larger microphone tends to win, and the policy fight gets lost in the noise. In this case President Obama clearly has a bigger microphone. The other lesson from 1995-1996 that may *not* be worth testing is that self-inflicted wounds, such as being blamed for shutting down the government, are politically survivable.

[1] For more on the mechanics of a shutdown, see: [INSERT LINK HERE](#)