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*The Current* podcast**

**“Is this government shutdown different?”**

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*Episode Summary:*

As of October 1, 2025, non-essential U.S. government operations ceased due to the failure of Congress to pass legislation that funds government agencies. The latest shutdown follows others that have occurred during both Republican and Democratic administrations and under Congresses’ controlled by both parties. To discuss this shutdown and what it means for governance moving forward, Brookings senior fellows Elaine Kamarck and Molly Reynolds join *The Current*.

**REYNOLDS:** It's not just about the issues that brought us to the shutdown on a short term spending measure, it's really about the broader context in which this fight is happening, which is this world where the executive branch has demonstrated repeatedly that it does not feel like it has to follow the appropriations laws that Congress has passed, and to actually spend the money that Congress has appropriated.

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**DEWS:** Hi, I'm Fred Dews, and you're listening to *The Current*, part of the Brookings Podcast network. As of October 1st, 2025, one week ago today as we're recording, non-essential U.S. government operations ceased due to the failure of Congress to pass legislation that funds government agencies. The latest shutdown follows others that have occurred during both Republican and Democratic administrations and under Congresses controlled by both parties.

To help us understand the parameters of this shutdown and what it can mean for governance moving forward, I'm joined in the studio by two Brookings senior fellows, Elaine Kamarck, the founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management, and Molly Reynolds, the interim vice president and director of Governance Studies at Brookings.

Elaine, welcome back to *The Current*.

**KAMARCK:** Thank you.

**DEWS:** And Molly, welcome back to *The Current*.

**REYNOLDS:** It's always great to be here.

**DEWS:** So, we are a week into this government shutdown. Molly, what would you say are the key sticking points preventing a compromise right now? And also as we're looking ahead a week, October 15th, why is that a critical deadline?

**REYNOLDS:** So the most proximate sticking point is the set of health care-related asks that Democrats and Congress have identified as what they want to get out of any deal to reopen the government and fund it on a short term basis. The most significant of these is around extending a set of subsidies for individuals to help them purchase health insurance on the individual marketplaces that were created by the Affordable Care Act.

October 15th is an important date because it's the first date at which many federal workers who are currently furloughed or who are working without pay because of the lapse in appropriations, October 15th is the first day on which many of those workers will miss a paycheck. And so that'll really kind of raise the visibility of of the shutdown.

I do also want to note that while we're thinking about health care as kind of the most proximate short term issue for potentially unlocking a deal here, there's a much larger set of issues around broader questions of congressional power and the incursion by the Office of Management and Budget into Congress's spending power that have been developing over the last nine months that are really, I can't stress this

enough, like, existential questions for the U.S. Congress. And those aren't going to go away even if Congress can reach some sort of short term agreement to keep the government open for another six or seven weeks to fund these subsidies to, you know, make some of these health care changes. These bigger questions are still gonna be with us, even if we make it out of the shutdown on a short term basis.

**DEWS:** Elaine, I'd like to turn to you. Can you talk about some of the immediate, tangible impacts of this shutdown? We know that hundreds of thousands of workers have been furloughed, but what are the most visible consequences our listeners might be seeing or experiencing directly?

**KAMARCK:** Well, I mean, the the most visible will be and has been the national parks. Okay? If you are planning to visit a national park, you will still be able to get in, but if there's any exhibits, museums, things like that, you won't be able to get in. And so that's, that's probably the most visible.

But then there's there's all sorts of other things that will happen. If you are on Social Security, you're fine. I mean, they're gonna pay your checks. Or Medicare bills will be paid, et cetera. But if you have a problem, okay, forget about it. Okay? There's gonna be nobody home to solve your problem. Or if you are just applying for disability or Social Security, this could be a problem as well.

And then the third one, which is not immediate, but is profound, is that training programs are shut down. And so when you shut down training programs, you slow down the number of people getting into the government to replace people who are needed. And of course, where that's gonna have the most effect is at the FAA, where the shutdown will affect the pipeline of air traffic controllers.

And that brings us to air traffic controllers. We are already seeing big slowdowns. I think last night on the news, they showed seven or eight cities that were having slowdowns because there's not enough air traffic control support in those places. In the last shutdown, ironically, when air traffic control shutdowns got to be their peak. Guess what? They settled the shutdown.

**REYNOLDS:** Yeah. So I want to build on a couple of things that Elaine said. So one, this point about the air traffic controllers I think is a really helpful one to think about that, you know, it may be that the way we get out of the shutdown is because there's a deal on health care.

But what helps unlock the potential for that deal may be something we're not even talking about right now. So in 2019, as Elaine indicated, it was this slowdown at a number of air traffic control facilities because the folks who worked there were tired of showing up without getting paid that really sort of helped set in motion the deal that reopened the government.

The other thing I'll just say that I think is important for Americans to remember when they think about shutdowns in terms of what stops and what doesn't, is that to some degree it's people, but it's also functions. So if you go into a Social Security office, there are some set of things that the people in that office are allowed to do under a shutdown because those are considered essential functions, and some other set of

things that they're not allowed to do. And, you know, you as an average person just trying to get your needs met, you're not gonna know which one of those things are.

So there's a lot of uncertainty that gets created. And so that's even before you get to the point of, like, can I get what I need or not. You just simply don't know.

**DEWS:** Let me ask you, Molly, about what may be perceived as additional kind of forcing mechanisms in this. You mentioned the incursion of the OMB, the Office of Management and Budget, into the appropriations process. The OMB, led by Russell Vought, last week released a draft memo suggesting that it could execute a reduction in force, a firing of furloughed employees. It has also talked about perhaps not paying furloughed employees back pay.

So Molly, could the White House even do these kinds of things? Fire civil servants during a government shutdown? Not give back pay to federal workers when they return to work?

**REYNOLDS:** Yes, I think it's important to take these two questions in the broader context of what the Office of Management and Budget has been doing since Trump was sworn in in January. And so we have seen them do any number of things that represent real kind of incursions into Congress's power. We've seen them execute lots of other reductions in force.

So I think one question is to what degree is what they are doing now and are tying to the shutdown actually what they were planning to do anyway. And I think if you sort of talk to lawyers about this, they'll identify a couple of different questions. The first is is a lapse in appropriations, a shutdown, a bona fide reason under the regulations that govern reductions in force for firing people? I think the consensus there is that maybe, maybe not. Would a court, would this set of federal courts that we have right now, upholds a reduction in force under elapse in appropriations? Maybe, maybe not.

Second question is, can federal agencies plan for and execute RIFs during a shutdown? Is that itself an accepted function? And the answer to that is probably not. Will that stop them from trying? Also probably not. But if you look at the regulations that guide what agencies are supposed to be able to keep doing when there's a lapse in appropriations, planning to fire people is probably not one of those things.

And then the third thing I would say is that, you know, if the federal government does go down this road, will they follow all of the very complicated procedures for executing reductions in force? Also, probably not. There's no indication from what we've seen so far this year that the administration is sort of crossing all of its t's and dotting all of its i's in that way.

**KAMARCK:** And let me, let me add to that because I think Molly gave a great description of all the legal complexities here. There's another aspect, which is can the government continue to function with this many fewer people? Already, we are looking at, and, and we're doing a study on this, at the number of rehires in the government.

What was happening is some agencies were saying, oops, we fired too many people, we need to bring some people back. So then if you then add RIFs on top of that, done again in the haphazard way that DOGE did this, which we're still working out of, you're gonna face a question of can these government agencies do what the public expects them to do?

**REYNOLDS:** And I think this is actually a really important point in thinking about, you know, we're a week plus into the shutdown. We actually haven't seen some of the worst case scenarios in this space be realized so far. They may well still be. But I think one important thing to think about is the way in which I think some of what we're seeing here is actually a power struggle within the administration, and the idea that the folks at OMB have a maximalist view of executive power. They think that the president has really broad authority under the U.S. Constitution. And they want that authority not just to be exercised, but to be exercised via OMB.

So I think part of what may be happening is that there's some amount of conflict between the White House and some of the agency heads, some of the cabinet secretaries about these very kinds of questions Elaine is articulating. You know, did this agency fire enough people? Fire too many people? And so it's not just a question of the president versus Congress, that that's a really important question. There are also big questions here about power within the executive branch.

**KAMARCK:** Well, and let me give you a perfect example of Molly's point. Who was the first cabinet secretary to take on Elon Musk in front of the president? It was the Secretary of Transportation, Sean Duffy. And what he brought to the table was the shortage of air traffic controllers, which by the way predates the shutdown. It predates the Trump administration. That started as a result of COVID. So that's been going on for a long time, and there weren't enough people in the pipeline, et cetera, et cetera.

So what you have is cabinet secretaries conscious now because they're now in office, et cetera, of what their offices are supposed to do. And also conscious of the fact that they will get the blame if something really screws up. And then of course, President Trump will get the blame and get mad at them. So, you know, I think the the notion of the power struggle is really an important one.

**DEWS:** We've talked a lot about OMB now in this conversation, and I mentioned that there have been shutdowns in the past under both Republican and Democratic administrations, through all kinds of congresses. I think the last one was 2019, lasted 35 days. But are we seeing an unprecedented level of involvement of the executive branch itself in the attempt to manage expectations for the shutdown and attempts to be involved in the situation at all?

**KAMARCK:** Let me say, I think we're seeing unprecedented degree of involvement of OMB and the White House, because what you have in Russell Vought is a person who is dedicated to the concept of a unitary executive. And this has been battling around in Republican and conservative circles for many decades now, really since since Ronald Reagan's time. And you have it being pushed by Vought. It's not clear to me whether the rest of the president's cabinet agrees with him.

**REYNOLDS:** So I would say that some of the things that we're seeing now during the shutdown in terms of how the White House and OMB are operating during the shutdown, we saw some previews of this during that same long shutdown at the end of 2018, the beginning of 2019. In that period we saw OMB in that case try to sort of engage in creative lawyering in ways that were intended to make the shutdown less painful. So, to Elaine's point about national parks in 2018, 2019, they were more permissive than OMB had been under previous shutdowns in what they let stay open at the national parks.

They reversed a longstanding policy at the Internal Revenue Service in terms of whether tax refunds could be processed during a shutdown because that was, that happened at the beginning of tax filing season. So I think we went into this with a sense that these were people in the White House, in OMB, who were willing to kind of read the law creatively to their own ends during a shutdown.

**DEWS:** Well, look, I think it's fair to say that a majority of people don't like government shutdowns, especially the workers themselves who are furloughed, and also Americans who rely on and enjoy government services like Elaine you mentioned national parks, but also safe air travel and Social Security. And shutdowns always cost the economy billions of dollars. So why does Congress still do this? What are ... are there any changes that could be made to prevent this kind of fiscal brinkmanship in the future.

**REYNOLDS:** Yeah. So for me, our kind of last 10 to 15 years of shutdown politics are really driven less by dysfunction in the appropriations process specifically, and more by broader challenges that Congress faces to legislating in the current environment. In a world where it is difficult for Congress to legislate, it turns increasingly towards the fewer must pass measures that come before it every year. So think of kind of couple of trains that have to leave the station, and those are asked to bear more and more of Congress's political conflict.

And you combine that with a very natural human tendency to only work in the face of a hard deadline. Those two dynamics together have brought us to this place where we see really frequent threats of shutdowns, if not actual shutdowns like we're experiencing right now.

**KAMARCK:** And, and I think that of course you have to look at political polarization. Right? You have to look particularly at asymmetric polarization, at a Republican party that has a very prominent core, mostly the Freedom Caucus, that basically has a sort of nihilistic attitude towards government. They don't like it. They don't care if it's shut down. They actually think it's good that it's shut down. And so that is different than the two party system in the past where they could get to a point where they would compromise and keep things open.

**DEWS:** So it sounds Elaine that you think that this is a different kind of shutdown than we've seen in the past?

**KAMARCK:** Because it's a different world. I mean, it's a different political world than we've seen in the past. And I don't see the way out of it until Congress changes.

**REYNOLDS:** Yeah, and I'll just add that, to a little bit go back to where we started, is that it's not just about the issues that brought us to the shutdown on a short term spending measure. It's really about the broader context in which this fight is happening, which is this world where the executive branch has demonstrated repeatedly that it does not feel like it has to follow the appropriations laws that Congress has passed and to actually spend the money that Congress has appropriated.

And when you have that as the shadow over your negotiations, it's really hard for members of Congress to do the hard work of coming to a deal when they have no reason to expect that the deal will be implemented as they've worked it out. That is kind of looming over this entire conversation that we're having about why the government is shut down and when it's gonna reopen.

**DEWS:** Well, just as a reminder to listeners, we're taping this on Wednesday, October 8th, a week into the government shutdown. I know there will be a lot of news coming at us in the days to come that we'll be paying attention to and looking to you for answers. Molly Reynolds, Elaine Kamarck, thank you both for taking the time to share your expertise today.

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**REYNOLDS:** Thanks for having me.

**KAMARCK:** Yeah, thanks for having us.

**DEWS:** You can learn more about Elaine Kamarck and Molly Reynolds and their research on our website, Brookings dot edu.