

Why a quick compromise to the first government shutdown in nearly 7 years seems unlikely

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The Capitol is seen in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 25, 2025.

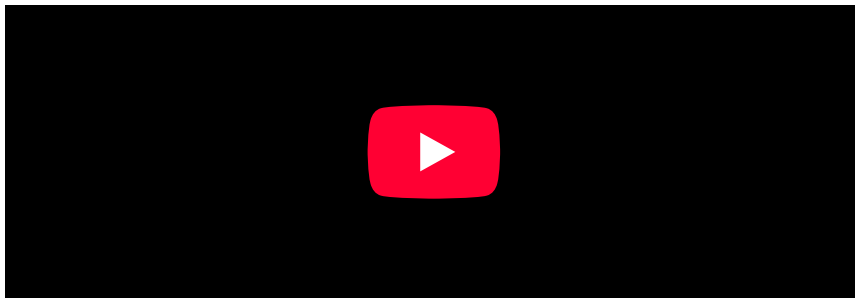
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Congress failed to meet an Oct. 1, 2025, deadline to adopt a spending measure and keep the federal government open, resulting in the first government shutdown in nearly seven years. With both Democrats and Republicans seemingly prepared for a long fight, Alfonso Serrano, a politics editor at The Conversation, interviewed Charlie Hunt, a congressional expert at Boise State University, about the prospects of a compromise and what's at stake for both parties.

Both sides appear to be dug in. Do you see a path to a quick compromise?

Not at this point. The Democrats have made clear at least what their stated sticking point is: these health care subsidies that are set to expire at the end of this year that were part of the Obamacare legislation. Politically speaking, this is part of a larger tactic of pushing back broadly and finally having some point of leverage against the Trump administration. The Democrats are going to use this moment to draw attention to what they see as abuses in the administration.

There have been a number of incidents like the spectacle at the Department of Defense (on Sept. 30), the use of the military in cities, and a lot of the other uses or abuses of the Justice Department or the Trump administration. Even though those all are technically separate from the shutdown issue, it's impossible to talk about the Democrats' strategy without making reference to those as things that a lot of folks of the left are really upset about. And this is a vehicle by which the Democrats can push back politically and actually use some of their power to stop momentum and draw attention to what the administration is doing.



But on the Republican side of things, they have a pretty simple argument, which is they want to continue funding the government at current levels and the Democrats do not. Until those dynamics change, or until enough Democratic senators get nervous about the optics of what is going on, no, I don't see a pathway out.

How does the White House's power over government spending, in the form of impoundment, affect negotiations?

The process of impoundment is basically the executive branch declining to spend money that Congress has appropriated. Technically speaking, that is not legal under the Impoundment Act that was passed following Richard Nixon practicing this method in the 1970s. If you're the Democrats and you're trying to negotiate for some kind of spending, for instance on these health care subsidies, and say you win a concession from the Republicans, then the Democrats might rightfully say, "Why would we even agree to this when we think there's a chance that you're either going to impound these funds that we're appropriating for these subsidies, or you're just going to have another rescissions package and the Republican-led Congress, with a simple majority, is just going to take these funds back? And then we haven't won any concessions."

Who are key players and groups of senators and representative who might decide how long this shutdown lasts?

You have people like GOP Sen. Rand Paul who are sort of the Tea Party or Freedom Caucus wing of the party, who want to see less government spending overall, and on principal tend to oppose these continuing resolutions. He was the only Republican who voted against the GOP bill last night. I have the feeling that if Republicans like the Senate Majority Leader John Thune manage to peel off a few more Democrats, and Rand Paul ends up being the deciding vote, they might be able to get him on board to pass this package.

In terms of the Senate, the real sticking points are the Democrats. You've got a shrinking number of moderate Democrats who could end up joining the Republicans on future votes to pass their spending bill. (You have) John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, who has been a bit of a wild card for the Democrats ever since he took office in 2023. Then you've got other more moderate Democrats from middle-of-the-road states. People like Catherine Cortez Masto in Nevada and others from states like Arizona or Pennsylvania, or maybe Wisconsin. But, for the most part, the Democrats have held the line.

To me, at the end of the day it's a question of how much leadership in these two parties can hold together their caucus. I think both Chuck Schumer and Hakeem Jeffries, the Democratic leaders in the Senate and House, respectively, have faced a ton of blowback from Democratic voters, who have made it really clear that their strategy last time was not something the left supported. So I think there's a lot more political pressure on them this time. And (Schumer and Jeffries) are going to sort of use that pressure a lot more with their caucus members than they did last time.



The dome of the U.S. Capitol is seen before dawn on Wednesday, Oct. 1, 2025, in Washington.

AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein

Which party stands to lose more from the political backlash of the shutdown?

It's perfectly possible that we end up having this fight and there are no winners. A lot of times in these negotiations it ends up being who can save the most face. Who can get away from the fight without having lost the respect of their own supporters.

I have the feeling that most Democratic senators understand that Republicans are not going to suddenly give in on these health care subsidies, or that Donald Trump is going to suddenly say, "You know what, you're right. We shouldn't use the military in American cities." Or that (Director of the Office of Management and Budget) Russell Vought is suddenly going to say, "You're right. The executive branch should really stop impounding funds and we're just going to give you what you want." The Democrats understand that, but they are trying to demonstrate to their voters that they are going to do some kind of fighting and use whatever small leverage they do have.

I think there is more on a policy basis for the Democrats to lose just based on their ideological principles. There are plenty of Republicans that, frankly, are happy to see the government shut down, to demonstrate to the American people that “hey, look, you don’t need this much government, you can get away with less, this is a good opportunity maybe to cut a bunch of government programs, do mass firings of federal workers, as the OMB director has suggested.” Whereas the Democrats favor more robust social safety net programs and more government spending to achieve their goals.

So the longer the government stays shut down, the less funding those programs are going to get. In that sense, the Democrats have more to lose. On the other hand, the Republicans can lose a lot in terms of public relations because of who is leading their party.

I think Donald Trump demonstrated in the last shutdown, back in 2018-2019, that he has a great deal of difficulty not making these fights all about him, at least from a public perspective. That doesn’t tend to go well for him because he’s a pretty unpopular president, because he tends to bite off more than he can chew in fights like these. And that’s something the Democrats can use to their advantage from a public relations or communications perspective, in terms of talking to their voters.

But the question is going to be: How much of that is worth the losses that are going to be incurred if we’re talking about a government that is shut down for weeks or even months? That’s going to be a lot of pain for Americans. Then it just turns to who ends up getting the blame. And I don’t think we know enough yet.

Charlie Hunt does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond their academic appointment.

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