

# CIVICS IN REAL LIFE

## Continuing Resolutions & Government Shutdowns

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how “We the People” interact with the government and each other. Let’s help each other expand our civic literacy.

Friday, October 1 is the beginning of the federal government’s fiscal or budgetary year. This is the time between October 1 and September 30 the following year that the monies allocated for government programs are spent and accounted for.

Under federal law, to keep the government open and functioning, Congress must pass a new budget within this 12-month window. If they don’t, the country faces a partial government shutdown. Unfortunately, Congress rarely completes this task on time. In fact, the last time they did was in 1997, so to prevent the government from shutting down, they utilize one of their favorite legislative tools, a continuing resolution.

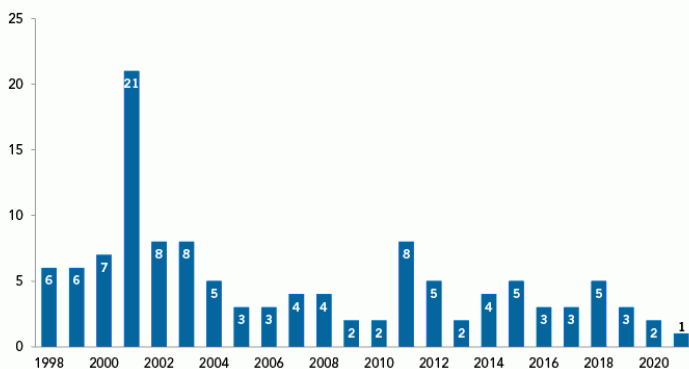
A continuing resolution is a temporary way for Congress to deal with a long-term funding issue, like the federal budget. When Congress cannot reconcile its spending differences, and pass a budget on time, it is able to temporarily extend government spending at its current levels by passing a continuing resolution.

This is what happened the night of September 30, 2021, the last day of the fiscal year. With a partial government shutdown looming, both the House and Senate passed a continuing resolution to fund the government through December 3, 2021.



**PETER G. PETERSON FOUNDATION** Lawmakers have enacted a total of 120 continuing resolutions over the past 24 fiscal years

NUMBER OF CONTINUING RESOLUTIONS ENACTED BY FISCAL YEAR



SOURCE: Congressional Research Service, Appropriations Status Table: FY2020 and FY2021, October 2020; and Continuing Resolutions: Overview of Components and Practices, April 2019.  
NOTE: Legislation is counted as a continuing resolution if it included any appropriations that did not extend through the end of the fiscal year.  
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While this is not a permanent fiscal fix, it does provide additional time for the members of the House and Senate to work out their differences on the budget so that one can be passed and signed into law. If these differences cannot be worked out by then, this continuing resolution process starts all over again. If not successful, then the federal government would partially shut down.

When this happens, not all of the federal government is affected because some agencies are not tied to the annual budget. For example, Social Security payments, Medicare benefits, and veterans benefits continue despite the government being partially shut down. Additionally, there are some federal workers that are essential to the nation’s well-being, so even if the government shuts down, they still do their jobs without

pay. Members of the armed forces and aviation services, as well as law enforcement, fall into this special class of federal workers.

While not common, government shutdowns have occurred 21 times since 1976. The longest government shutdown lasted 35 days, from December 22, 2018 - January 25, 2019, and ended when the Congress passed a continuing resolution to keep the government open until February 15, 2019.

Despite failing to pass a complete federal budget by the end of the fiscal year over the past 24 years, Congress’ use of the continuing resolution keeps the government’s lights on. Unfortunately, the question of, “for how long,” always looms when continuing resolutions are used.

**To Think and To Do:** Why do you think Congress keeps relying on continuing resolutions instead of passing an actual budget before the beginning of the fiscal year? Are there political advantages to using a continuing resolution? Explain.



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