

Three Defunding Myths

Liberals seriously exaggerate the costs of the Cruz strategy

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In less than a week, the continuing resolution (CR) that is currently funding the government will expire, possibly precipitating what one and all refer to as a “government shutdown.” This term is usually uttered in terms that suggest an event falling in severity somewhere between Hurricane Katrina and the zombie apocalypse.

Unfortunately, much of the debate surrounding this question has been misleading, if not completely wrong. Among the most frequently repeated myths:

Republicans voted to shut down the government. House Republicans voted this week to fund the government through December. In fact, the CR that Republicans passed would actually increase federal spending by roughly \$21 billion over current law. They did include a provision, or rider, prohibiting the use of any money for implementation of Obamacare, but that would have no effect on the rest of government. On the Senate side, one could argue that, if Senator Cruz is successful in his filibuster of the House CR, Republicans should be held responsible for the consequences. On the other hand, if Senate Democrats refuse to pass the House CR, they would be responsible for whatever followed. Regardless, the only bill on the table right now *does not* shut down the government.

A government shutdown shuts down the government. In reality more of the government is likely to stay open than to close. For example, government activities that have “some reasonable and articulable connection between the function to be performed and the safety of human life or the protection of property” will continue regardless of whether Congress passes a CR. This includes not only such obvious things as military operations and homeland security, but also air-traffic control, health care at Veterans Administration hospitals, law enforcement and criminal investigations, oversight of food and drug safety, nuclear safety, and so forth. In fact, much as we might wish it otherwise, even the IRS would continue to function under such a “shutdown.” Moreover, since entitlement programs, like Social Security and Medicare, are not subject to annual appropriations, they would also continue.

That is not to suggest that a government shutdown is a good thing or that there won't be some pain involved. Government employees, including the military, won't get paid on time — although even they will probably receive their pay retroactively once a CR is finally passed. Passport applications will go unprocessed; education and training programs will be suspended; parks and monuments will close; and vendors, including many small businesses, will have their payments delayed. Further, one can expect President Obama to make sure as many people as

possible are inconvenienced in order to stoke public anger. (Recall how cuts from the sequester were manipulated.)

Government shutdowns inevitably hurt Republicans. Those arguing that a government shutdown will cost Republicans electorally in 2014 point to the 1995 shutdown that grew out of the impasse between President Clinton and Newt Gingrich's House Republicans. However, despite the story that has grown up around that shutdown, there is little evidence that the shutdown, which lasted 28 days total, actually hurt Republicans. In fact, in the 1996 elections that followed, Republicans lost only two House seats, far less than expected considering the gains they made in 1994. The GOP actually gained two seats in the Senate.

True, Bill Clinton won reelection in 1996, and there is some evidence that the shutdown and his response may have helped his standing. But recall that Bob Dole was an extraordinarily weak Republican opponent, and Clinton won only 49 percent of the vote in a three-way race (Ross Perot took 8.4 percent that year).

How would the public react today? The polling is ambiguous. Republicans point to polls showing how unpopular Obamacare is. Democrats cite polls showing the public opposed to a government shutdown over the issue. More telling, perhaps, is a recent Pew poll showing that voters would blame both parties nearly equally for any shutdown.

Of course none of this tells us whether the Republican strategy is a good one. There's no obvious pathway that realistically leads to defunding Obamacare. The spectacle of Senator Cruz filibustering legislation that he had earlier urged Republicans to pass hardly seems like a winning political move.

But whatever the outcome of this debate — and whatever strategy Republicans eventually pursue — it helps to understand what we're discussing. Neither side has been quite honest about it.