

Locked down — on U.S. shutdown

Last week, the 19th federal government [shutdown in U.S.](#) history went into force. If previous occasions are any indication, this shutdown will also lead to the furlough of many hundreds of thousands of government workers, closure of national parks with a potential loss of hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue, and a possible overall macroeconomic cost of several billions of dollars in terms of productivity loss associated with the cessation of multiple public services. This encore is entirely preventable and the seismic payment default can be traced back to one inescapable reality in Washington: congressional dysfunction stemming from bitterly partisan politicking. A federal shutdown occurs when lawmakers fail to agree on a spending bill, and cannot even sign off on a stopgap funding measure that might keep the government machinery humming for a few more months. In this case, the bill in question would have helped tide over a looming fiscal gap at least until the middle of February. Yet that did not happen, because Republicans refused to compromise on a hardline approach on immigration policy, specifically on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the Obama-era clemency policy for foreign-born children of U.S.-based undocumented workers. That policy was ended in September 2017 when President Donald Trump revoked his predecessor's executive order to protect these children, the so-called DREAMers, from deportation. This apparently rattled Democratic lawmakers to the point where they were willing to make a stopgap budget deal, contingent on Congress agreeing to legislation to shield nearly 700,000 of these law-abiding youngsters from removal.

With dark clouds on Capitol Hill overshadowing the first anniversary of Mr. Trump's presidency, he has reiterated his call for strong border security and a crackdown on "illegal immigrants". Interestingly, a recent CNN poll suggested 84% of Americans want DACA extended. But a government shutdown is likely to cut both ways, hurting the prospects of those on both sides of the aisle seeking re-election in the November 2018 mid-term election. Voters may well consider Democrats to be obstructionist, or as putting undocumented workers ahead of national security. And Republicans may lose votes for failing to keep the government working despite controlling the Senate, House of Representatives and the White House. Regardless of who wins in that election, the debate on immigration reform will continue. Too much is at stake for not only the nearly 11.3 million undocumented workers but also the nearly 1.5 million temporary foreign workers, among whom are 500,000 to 700,000 H-1B visa holders, the majority of them from India. For, when Congress finally transcends its partisan biases and legislates a comprehensive immigration reform package, it will likely introduce a revised policy for each of the visa categories.

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