

Lesson Plan: Understanding U.S. Government Shutdowns (Student Version)

1. Warm-Up

Discussion Questions:

- What happens when your phone service is cut off because you didn't pay?
- What would happen if your city's government offices closed for a week?
- Do you think a government can ever "shut down"? Why or why not?

2. Background Reading

Government shutdowns may sound impossible, but in the United States they have happened more than 20 times in the last 40 years. The first modern shutdown took place in 1980. Since then, some have lasted only a few hours, while others stretched for weeks. The longest one in U.S. history lasted 35 days, from December 2018 to January 2019.

A shutdown occurs when Congress and the President cannot agree on a budget. The U.S. Constitution requires Congress to approve spending bills before money can be used by government agencies. If lawmakers miss the deadline, agencies run out of legal authority to spend money, and many parts of the government must stop operating. This does not mean the government disappears completely, but it means a large part of its activities are "frozen" until a new budget is passed.

During a shutdown, millions of government workers are affected. Some are classified as "essential employees." These include military personnel, airport security agents, border patrol officers, and certain medical workers. They must continue working even though they might not receive paychecks until after the shutdown ends. Other workers are placed on "furlough," which means they are sent home without pay but may return when the government reopens. This creates financial stress for families, since rent, food, and bills do not stop.

Public services are also disrupted. National parks and museums usually close their doors. Passport and visa applications are delayed. Scientific research projects may pause. Even food safety inspections and some health programs can be affected. In short, a shutdown has a ripple effect that spreads far beyond Washington, D.C., touching the daily lives of ordinary citizens.

Why does this happen in the first place? Often, shutdowns result from political fights. One party may want to increase spending on programs like healthcare or education, while the other demands spending cuts to reduce debt. If neither side is willing to compromise, the budget deadline passes without agreement. This "gridlock" is a common feature of U.S. politics, especially when different parties control the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the Presidency.

But who does the U.S. government actually owe money to? The federal government borrows heavily to finance its operations. It sells Treasury bonds to investors, banks, pension funds, and even foreign governments such as China and Japan. Americans also indirectly lend money through retirement accounts and savings funds that invest in government securities. This borrowing allows the U.S. to pay for everything from defense to social programs, but it also creates trillions of dollars in national debt.

One sensitive question is whether the government has borrowed from Social Security. The Social

Security system is funded by payroll taxes paid by American workers. By law, that money goes into a trust fund that pays benefits to retirees and disabled workers. Over the years, the government has indeed used surplus Social Security funds by issuing special Treasury bonds to the trust fund. In simple terms, the government borrowed the money and promised to pay it back with interest. This has created controversy, but technically the trust fund still holds those bonds as assets, and Social Security payments continue.

In conclusion, a U.S. government shutdown is not just a political game in Washington. It affects workers, families, travelers, and businesses across the country. It shows how political disagreements can quickly become real-life problems. Understanding shutdowns helps explain the challenges of running a democracy where leaders must balance budgets, debts, and the needs of millions of people.

3. Vocabulary Focus

Formal / Key Terms:

- Budget – a plan for spending money
- Shutdown – when something stops operating
- Essential services – services that must continue, like police or hospitals
- Treasury bond – a type of government loan from investors
- Trust fund – money saved for a special purpose
- Debt ceiling – the legal limit on how much money the government can borrow
- Deficit – when the government spends more money than it collects in taxes
- Appropriations – official approval of money for government spending
- Default – failure to pay back borrowed money
- Stimulus – government spending to boost the economy

Slang / Jargon:

- Kick the can down the road – delaying a decision or problem
- Belt-tightening – spending less money to save during tough times
- Playing chicken – two sides refusing to back down until one gives in
- Gridlock – a situation where nothing can move forward because of disagreement
- Shutdown showdown – nickname for political fights that cause a shutdown

4. Vocabulary Practice – Fill in the Blank

Use the words below to complete the sentences. Some words may be used more than once.

Word Bank (Formal / Key Terms):

budget – shutdown – essential services – Treasury bond – trust fund – debt ceiling – deficit – appropriations – default – stimulus

Word Bank (Slang / Jargon):

kick the can down the road – belt-tightening – playing chicken – gridlock – shutdown showdown

Formal Vocabulary Sentences:

1. Congress must pass a _____ before government agencies can legally spend money.
2. If no agreement is reached, the government may face a _____, stopping many services.
3. Hospitals, police, and the military are considered _____ and continue operating during a shutdown.
4. The U.S. government borrows money by selling a _____ to investors.
5. Social Security money is held in a _____ that pays benefits to retirees.

6. Raising the _____ allows the government to borrow more money.
7. When the government spends more than it collects in taxes, it creates a _____.
8. Without proper _____ from Congress, federal agencies cannot legally use funds.
9. If the U.S. refused or failed to pay back loans, it would be in _____.
10. During a recession, the government may increase spending as an economic _____.

Slang / Jargon Sentences:

11. Instead of solving the budget problem, politicians decided to _____ and delay the decision.
12. Families often practice _____ during tough times by cutting extra expenses.
13. Two political parties were _____, each refusing to compromise on spending cuts.
14. Political _____ in Washington means that little progress is made on new laws.
15. The media called the standoff over funding a “_____” between Congress and the President.

5. Comprehension Questions

1. Has a U.S. government shutdown ever happened?
2. What is the main cause of a shutdown?
3. Who continues working during a shutdown, even without pay?
4. What public services usually close?
5. Who does the U.S. government owe money to?
6. What is the relationship between Social Security and government borrowing?
7. How does a shutdown affect ordinary people?

6. Wrap-Up & Homework

Class Wrap-Up:

- Review key vocabulary and answers to the fill-in-the-blank exercise.
- Ask students: Do shutdowns make democracy stronger (forcing debate) or weaker (hurting citizens)?

Homework Assignment:

Write one page comparing the U.S. situation with your own country. Could a government shutdown happen there? Why or why not? Use at least five vocabulary words from today's lesson in your answer.