

# USA: What was the American government shutdown all about?

Tuesday 18 February 2014, by [LA BOTZ Dan](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2013).

What a mess! The United States government was shut down for 16 days in October because of the failure of Congress to pass a budget, resulting in the furlough of 800,000 Federal workers, a delay in pay for another 1.3 million, and reductions in services that affected businesses and workers alike, as well as programs serving millions from pre-school children to the elderly. While the military was exempt, organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and the Food and Drug Administration performed only the most essential services. Government contractors also had to cease work and could not be paid. Even citizens of other countries were affected. Immigrant workers could not be processed and employers could not verify the immigration status of their employees as required by law. Standard and Poor's, the financial services agency, said that the shutdown cost the American economy \$24 billion dollars. Finally on day sixteen—with no change in the situation whatsoever—Congress voted to fund the government and everybody went back to work.

Why such drastic developments? The shutdown can be attributed to the ultra-conservative Tea Party movement which came to national prominence in 2009 when it held its first national demonstrations against President Barack Obama's economic stimulus package. In late 2009 and early 2010, incensed over the Affordable Care Act—now commonly called Obamacare—Tea Party groups held militant demonstrations at town hall meetings around the country. They characterized Obamacare as "socialist," though it is a thoroughly capitalist reform requiring all citizens to purchase insurance. Despite the Tea Party's protests, Obama care passed—but the Tea Party promised to fight to overturn it.

The Tea Party is a loose coalition of a variety of rightwing groups, from libertarians who want little or no government to Evangelicals who want Christian values to guide the country. It is funded by fabulously wealthy capitalists, such as the Koch brothers, and led politically by conservative think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation. The Tea Party's social base, however, is made up largely of white, middle class and working class folk, principally suburbanites (two-thirds of all Americans live in the country's suburbs).

Tea Party organizations generally oppose President Obama whom they consider a dangerous socialist. They strongly favor the capitalist system and support small business. They want a balanced budget and oppose Keynesian deficit spending. They are for dismantling the welfare state. They are hostile to labor unions, oppose affirmative action for racial minorities, and are against immigration reform. They strongly support the right to own and carry guns. While the Tea Party is not to be confused with the ultra-rightwing groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, the Aryan Nation, and other hate groups, it does provide a milieu in which they can sometimes be found propagandizing and recruiting.

The Tea Party developed the theory that George W. Bush and other Republican administrations had failed because Republicans in Congress had assimilated to the liberal Washington elite. If only real conservatives were in power, they claimed, everything would be different. So in the 2010 mid-term elections the Tea Party adopted a strategy of running ultra-conservative candidates against moderate and even conservative Republicans. The Tea Party was successful in dozens of

Congressional Districts in 2010 and formed a Congressional Tea Party Caucus, today made up of 47 members out of 435 representatives and six members out of 100 in the Senate.

The Tea Party success in the 2010 and 2012 elections struck terror in the hearts of traditional Republicans who feared being targeted by such organizations as Heritage Action, the legislative arm of the Heritage Foundation. Under a recent Supreme Court decision, Citizens United, the government cannot restrict political donations from corporations, labor unions, or associations, meaning that millions of dollars can be spent by the wealthy to defeat insufficiently conservative Republicans. Consequently, the Republican Party majority in the House of Representatives acquiesced to the Tea Party demands to refuse to fund the federal government in order to force Congress to overturn Obama care. The House also stalled on raising the debt ceiling limit scheduled to expire on October 17. That is the law that allows Congress to actually pay for the programs for which it has already appropriated funds. The U.S. Treasury, major financial banks, and foreign heads of state warned the Republicans that failure to raise the debt ceiling could lead to another financial crisis such as that of 2008.

As the shutdown went on, the Republican Party began to fall in public opinion polls; by the end of the shutdown only 24 percent of American approved of the Republican Party and only 21 percent approved of the Tea Party. While most of the Tea Party members were unconcerned because they came from secure ultra-conservative districts, the great majority of Republican Party representatives began to fear that they might be facing a fate worse than the Tea Party hit list. To win the Republicans over, the Democrats agreed to negotiate over reductions in the major American social welfare programs—Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid—and come up with a deal by Dec. 16. So after 16 days, the Republicans voted for the budget, the government shutdown ended, services resumed, and employees went back to work.

The losers of this political fiasco were clearly the Tea Party and, more important, the Republican Party. The big winners of the contest are Barack Obama and the Democrats. In September, Obama was in a weak position, particularly because of his failure to take action against Syria even after it had crossed his “red line” of using chemical weapons against large numbers of its own population. The Democratic Party was divided, with progressives criticizing Obama for his failure to take stronger positions on the environment, his lack of support for immigration reform, and his neglect of the labor unions. Now Obama is the hero of the hour for having stood up against the Republicans. The Democratic Party is reunited behind its leader and well positioned for November 2014 mid-term elections. The strength of the Democratic Party consolidates its power, but its victory over the Republicans and the Tea Party may also create some space for the labor and social movements.

**Dan La Botz**

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