

The GOP Is Letting Democrats Win the Shutdown

di Noah Rothman

Republicans Are Getting Wobbly

Yesterday, CBS News correspondent Caitlin Huey-Burns asked Senator Chuck Schumer a pointed question: If extending Covid-era Obamacare subsidies was such an urgent imperative that they would obstruct the funding of the government now — subsidies that over [22 million](#) Americans now receive when just 6.6 million were beneficiaries in 2014 — why didn't Democrats make a stand on this issue when it was a live question before Congress? Why would they settle for only a temporary extension of those subsidies back in 2022? Schumer's answer amounted to a restatement of the question. "Well, this was passed a while ago, but we want to extend them," he said. "That's the point."

Fortunately, we have Phil to help us decipher Democrat-ese. "The answer is that if they tried to make them permanent it would have cost over \$300 [billion], which would have lost [former Senator Joe] Manchin," [Klein wrote](#). "So, they set them to expire at the end of 2025, betting that Republicans would cave ahead of an election year."

That's perfectly plausible, and it is supported by [contemporaneous reporting](#) around the debate over the so-called "[Inflation Reduction Act](#)." Surely, Democrats didn't cook up a plan to negotiate a government shutdown in 2025 in the middle of Joe Biden's presidency, but they're making the most of the conditions they created at the time.

If this shutdown is going according to plan, such as it is, the plan *seems* to be working, as *The Bulwark's* Jonathan Cohn attests. "Here's how you can tell Democrats have the upper-hand in the week-old shutdown fight," he wrote, "Marjorie Taylor Greene just endorsed their key demand."

It's true. The maverick Georgia representative who seems to have [never encountered](#) an [antisemitic conspiracy theory](#) she wasn't eager to [just ask](#)

[questions](#) about has been [getting a second look from legacy media outlets](#) amid her turn against Israel's defensive war with Iran's terrorist proxies. Her pivot leftward has many facets, one of which is her [newfound warmth](#) toward funneling taxpayer money into Obamacare's insatiable maw.

Cohn found a lot to like in Greene's recent handwringing over the GOP's refusal to capitulate in response to Democratic ultimatums. Indeed, Greene's weak knees signal to Cohn that the Democratic Party is set to recoup the political capital it waged on the shutdown and more:

The contours of this fight remain fluid, with the polls somewhat ambiguous and the insider machinations predictably opaque. But one week into the shutdown fight the signs of Republican weakness are impossible to miss, up to and including Trump declaring from the Oval Office on Monday that, "We have a negotiation going on right now with the Democrats that could lead to very good things. I'd like to see a deal made for great health care."

Ace National Review reporter Audrey Fahlberg wrote [more than a week ago](#) that congressional Republicans, particularly the populist sort, were getting uncomfortable denying the demos a Band-Aid on this unsustainable entitlement program. That's not new. What *is* interesting is the degree to which the Republican Party — up to and including the president — have abstained from putting much pressure on Democrats to abandon their strong-arm tactics.

Indeed, even though the administration had retailed its intention to pursue a maximalist version of the "[Washington Monument strategy](#)," it has so far done nothing of the sort.

That's a good point. In the days leading up to the shutdown, Office of Management and Budget director [Russ Vought](#) previewed the fire and brimstone he planned to rain down on Democrats and their political priorities if they were foolish enough to give him the tools to do so. And he seemed to have the backing of the president. "I can't believe the Radical Left Democrats gave me this unprecedented opportunity," [Trump wrote](#) on October 2. But he has not made the most of it. Not yet, anyway.

That's not to say that Republicans haven't explored avenues that might accentuate the hardship Democratic constituents are experiencing — among them, floating the

potential to withhold back pay for federal employees who won't draw a check until the government reopens. That avenue turned out to be [legally prohibitive](#).

Instead, perhaps owing as much to the political obstacles in their path as their scruples, Republicans in Congress are pursuing a conventional messaging strategy that eschews hardball politics. Rather than make the shutdown as painful as possible for the American public, [House Speaker Mike Johnson](#) has opted to highlight the shutdown's entropic effects and put the onus on Democrats to resolve them.

In remarks on Wednesday, Johnson descended from federal heights to castigate individual Senate Democrats for allowing their respective states to suffer. He zoomed in on the plight borne by Georgia-based food banks, underscoring the negligence of Democratic Senators Jon Ossoff and Raphael Warnock. "I suspect they may continue, and they're hurting real people in the state of Georgia," Johnson said. What about New Hampshire's Senators Jeanne Shaheen and Maggie Hassan? Both senators, he said, "have repeatedly voted to keep to keep government closed and New Hampshire's national park sites closed by extension." And state-level hardships take no account of the dire state in which institutions with the federal government's remit, like air traffic controls, find themselves.

But doesn't the Republican speaker, to say nothing of the Republican Senate majority leader and the Republican president, bear some responsibility for the hardships federal service providers are enduring? No, the speaker insisted. "The job in the House is done," he told reporters when asked if the GOP-led House would pass a stand-alone bill to ensure Americans in uniform do not miss a paycheck. "Hakeem Jeffries and the House Democrats," [Johnson said](#), are "clamoring to get back here and have another vote, because some of them want to get on record and say they're for paying the troops. We already had that vote."

The speaker's strategy is sound, but he's not responding solely to discomfited bleats from the left. The bill to fund the U.S. military's payroll was introduced by a Republican representative and can claim bipartisan co-sponsorship. Once again, Democrats are seeing plenty of indications that the shutdown is inflicting more pain on their opponents.

It's hard to blame Democrats for getting the impression that the GOP is blinking. They are. From the populist Republicans who cannot stomach a fight over funding America's imminently insolvent entitlements to GOP lawmakers who earnestly fret over the prospect of American readiness in a dangerous world, it's the Republican Party that seems to be losing its nerve. Johnson deserves credit for standing firm, but he is his conference's servant as much as its leader. And so far, Democrats have evidenced far more tolerance for political pain — perhaps because they're not experiencing much at the moment.

That could change. For now, however, Democratic observers are emboldened by the weakness they're encountering in their opponents. Looking ahead, *The Bulwark's* Jonathan Cohn cautions Democrats to stand firm and oppose Republican alterations to Obamacare programs that subsidize zero-premium plans for low-income health insurance consumers. Maybe Democrats will go for broke and demand Republicans reverse the Medicaid cuts in the summer's reconciliation bill, sacrificing the only meaningful spending reduction in that legislation. If the GOP is going to cave, they might as well cave fully.

That is a wild-eyed ask. Even retiring Senate Republicans, like North Carolina's Thom Tillis, have balked at the notion that the upper chamber's majority party would give up such a concession before Democrats agree to fund the government. After that impasse is broken, though, all bets are off.

"You're telling me you can't find eight people that could walk the plank?" Tillis [told reporters](#) on Wednesday. "As a veteran plank-walker, it's not near as bad as it seems." Ominous stuff.

Maybe this dynamic evolves in a direction more favorable to conservative Republicans. For now, though, the GOP has not managed to impose any political consequences on the party that sought and secured the government shutdown.

ADDENDUM: The prospect of allowing American soldiers' paychecks to lapse seems like it's weighing heavily on Senate Republicans. Late Wednesday, [Axios](#) reported that Senate Majority Leader John Thune might break the impasse by bringing a Pentagon

appropriations bill to the floor — a short-term spending bill that would functionally reopen that part of the government.

“Bringing standalone appropriations bills to the floor would be a long and tortuous way to reopen the government, department by department,” the [Axios](#) report read. Indeed. And if the GOP indicates that it’s willing to sign itself up for torture, that’s what it will get.

If Republicans are prepared to relieve the pressure on U.S. service personnel, why aren’t they willing to do the same for America’s beleaguered federal workers, its bureaucrats, its non-essential staffers on whom many private businesses nevertheless depend for the functioning of their respective operations? You can see how this narrative could have a life of its own.

If congressional Republicans show any leg, they’ll be asked for more, and the fight-for-fight’s-sake strategy that progressive activists demanded from their Democratic representatives will be vindicated. Unless Republicans want to see even more thoughtless pugilism and recalcitrance from the minority party, they had better figure out how to put Democrats back on the defensive. And soon.