



CRS Report for Congress

Federal Funding Gaps: A Brief Overview

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Summary

The interval during the fiscal year when agency appropriations are not enacted into law, either in the form of a regular appropriations act or a continuing resolution, is referred to as a *funding gap*. When a funding gap occurs, the federal government begins a shutdown of the affected agencies, entailing the prompt furlough of non-emergency personnel and curtailment of agency activities.

During the period covering FY1977-FY2008, 17 funding gaps occurred, ranging in duration from one day to 21 full days. About half of these funding gaps were brief (i.e., three days or less in duration), with most occurring over a weekend, and the disruption in federal operations was minimal. In late 1995 and early 1996, President Bill Clinton and the Republican-controlled Congress engaged in difficult and protracted negotiations over budget policy, resulting in the veto of a continuing resolution and several regular appropriations acts for FY1996. Two funding gaps, amounting to five days and 21 days ensued, with about 800,000 federal employees furloughed initially. There have been no funding gaps since the two that occurred in FY1996.

This report will be updated.

Background

The routine activities of most federal agencies are funded annually by one or more of the regular appropriations acts. When action on the regular appropriations acts is delayed, a continuing appropriations act is used to provide interim funding. Measures providing continuing appropriations usually take the form of a joint resolution (rather than a bill) and are referred to as *continuing resolutions* (or CRs).

During the 57-year period covering FY1952-FY2008, all of the regular appropriations acts were enacted on time in only four instances (FY1977, FY1989, FY1995, and FY1997). No continuing resolutions were enacted for three of these fiscal years, but continuing resolutions were enacted for FY1977 to fund certain unauthorized programs whose funding had been dropped from the regular appropriations acts. Further,

no continuing resolutions were enacted for FY1953 even though all but one of the regular appropriations were enacted late.¹

The Antideficiency Act (31 U.S.C. 1341-1342, 1511-1519) generally bars agencies from continued operation in the absence of appropriations.² Exceptions are made under the act, including for activities involving “the safety of human life or the protection of property.” The interval during the fiscal year when agency appropriations are not enacted into law, either in the form of a regular appropriations act or a CR, is referred to as a *funding gap*. Although funding gaps may occur at the start of the fiscal year, they also may occur any time a CR expires and another CR (or the regular appropriations bill) is not enacted immediately thereafter. Also, multiple funding gaps may occur for a fiscal year.

In 1980 and 1981, Attorney General Benjamin Civiletti issued opinions clarifying the need for federal agencies to begin terminating regular activities immediately upon the occurrence of a funding gap.³ Consequently, when a funding gap occurs, the federal government begins a *shutdown* of the affected agencies. A shutdown entails the prompt furlough of non-emergency personnel and curtailment of agency activities, including the provision of many services to the public.⁴ The general practice of the federal government over the years has been to pay furloughed employees, after the shutdown has ended, for time missed, even when no work was performed.

In order to avoid funding gaps and their unwanted consequences, proposals have been offered from time to time to establish an “automatic continuing resolution” (ACR) that would provide a fallback source of funding for activities, at a restricted level, in the event the timely enactment of appropriations is disrupted.⁵ The funding would become available automatically and remain available as long as needed so that a funding gap would not occur and the furlough of federal employees would be avoided (or at least severely limited). Although the House and Senate have considered ACR proposals in the past, none have been enacted into law.

¹ Section 1414 of P.L. 82-547 (66 Stat. 661) made regular appropriations enacted late available as of July 1, 1952 (the first day of FY1953) and ratified any obligations incurred before their enactment.

² The Antideficiency Act is discussed in CRS Report RL30795, *General Management Laws: A Compendium*, Clinton T. Brass (coordinator), on pp. 93-97. In addition, the Government Accountability Office provides information about the act online at: [<http://www.gao.gov/ada/antideficiency.htm>].

³ The text of the opinions is included in Appendix IV and Appendix VIII to then General Accounting Office (now Government Accountability Office) report PAD-81-31, *Funding Gaps Jeopardize Federal Government Operations*, March 3, 1981.

⁴ For a discussion of federal government shutdowns, see CRS Report RL34680, *Shutdown of the Federal Government: Causes, Processes, and Effects*, by Clinton T. Brass.

⁵ For more information on this topic, see CRS Report RL30339, *Preventing Federal Government Shutdowns: Proposals for an Automatic Continuing Resolution*, by Robert Keith.

Funding Gaps: FY1977-FY2008

As **Table 1** shows, there were 17 funding gaps during the 32-year period beginning with FY1977 and continuing through FY2008. (FY1977 marked the first full implementation of the congressional budget process established by the Congressional Budget Act of 1974.) The enactment of a CR on the day after the previous CR expired, which has occurred often, is not counted as involving a funding gap. During the past nine fiscal years (covering FY2000-FY2008), for example, “next-day” CRs were enacted 14 times.

Most of the funding gaps occurred during the first half of the 32-year period. During the 16-year period covering FY1977-FY1992, 15 funding gaps occurred. However, only two funding gaps occurred during the remaining 16 years, covering FY1993-FY2008.

Multiple funding gaps occurred in four instances: (1) three gaps covering a total of 28 days in FY1978; (2) two gaps covering a total of four days in FY1983; (3) two gaps covering a total of three days in FY1985; and (4) two gaps covering a total of 26 days in FY1996.

Six of the funding gaps commenced with the beginning of the fiscal year on October 1. The remaining 11 funding gaps occurred at least several days after the fiscal year had begun. Nine of the funding gaps ended in October, four ended in November, three ended in December, and one ended in January.⁶

Funding gaps ranged in duration from one to 21 full days. Six of the seven lengthiest funding gaps, lasting between 8 and 17 days, occurred between FY1977 and FY1980, before the Civiletti opinions were issued. After the issuance of these opinions, the duration of funding gaps in general shortened considerably (ranging from one to three days, with the longer gaps occurring over the weekend). An important exception to this trend occurred in late 1995 and early 1996, when President Bill Clinton and the Republican-controlled Congress engaged in difficult and protracted negotiations over budget policy, resulting in the veto of a continuing resolution and several regular appropriations acts for FY1996. Two funding gaps, amounting to five days and 21 days ensued, with about 800,000 federal employees furloughed initially.

There have been no funding gaps since the two that occurred in FY1996.

⁶ The enactment of a series of continuing resolutions for a fiscal year is discussed in CRS Report RL32614, *Duration of Continuing Resolutions in Recent Years*, by Robert Keith.

Table 1. Appropriations Funding Gaps: FY1977-FY2008

Fiscal Year	Date Gap Commenced ^a	Full Day(s) of Gaps	Date Gap Terminated ^b
1977	Thursday, 09-30-76	10	Monday, 10-11-76
1978	Friday, 09-30-77	12	Thursday, 10-13-77
	Monday, 10-31-77	8	Wednesday, 11-09-77
	Wednesday, 11-30-77	8	Friday, 12-09-77
1979	Saturday, 09-30-78	17	Wednesday, 10-18-78
1980	Sunday, 09-30-79	11	Friday, 10-12-79
1981	—	—	—
1982	Friday, 11-20-81	2	Monday, 11-23-81
1983	Thursday, 09-30-82	1	Saturday, 10-02-82
	Friday, 12-17-82	3	Tuesday, 12-21-82
1984	Thursday, 11-10-83	3	Monday, 11-14-83
1985	Sunday, 09-30-84	2	Wednesday, 10-03-84
	Wednesday, 10-03-84	1	Friday, 10-05-84
1986	—	—	—
1987	Thursday, 10-16-86	1	Saturday, 10-18-86
1988	Friday, 12-18-87	1	Sunday, 12-20-87
1989	—	—	—
1990	—	—	—
1991	Friday, 10-05-90	3	Tuesday, 10-09-90
1992	—	—	—
1993	—	—	—
1994	—	—	—
1995	—	—	—
1996	Monday, 11-13-95	5	Sunday, 11-19-95
	Friday, 12-15-95	21	Saturday, 01-06-96

Fiscal Year	Date Gap Commenced^a	Full Day(s) of Gaps	Date Gap Terminated^b
1997	—	—	—
1998	—	—	—
1999	—	—	—
2000	—	—	—
2001	—	—	—
2002	—	—	—
2003	—	—	—
2004	—	—	—
2005	—	—	—
2006	—	—	—
2007	—	—	—
2008	—	—	—

Source: Prepared by the Congressional Research Service.

- a. Gap commenced at midnight of the date indicated. The enactment of a CR on the day after the previous CR expired, which has occurred often, is not counted as involving a funding gap.
- b. Gap terminated due to the enactment of a further continuing resolution or one or more regular appropriations acts.