

STOP FUNDING TRUMP'S TAKEOVER



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In a few weeks the government's funding will run out. If Democrats vote for a new spending bill, they will be funding Trump's autocratic takeover — and I don't see how they can. CreditCredit...Photograph by Eric Lee/The New York Times

If Democrats Have a Better Plan, I'd Like to Hear It

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In about three weeks, the government's funding will run out. Democrats will face a choice: Join Republicans to fund a government that President Trump is turning into a tool of authoritarian takeover and vengeance or shut the government down.

Democrats faced a version of this choice back in March. DOGE, the Department of Government Efficiency, was chain-sawing its way through the government. Civil servants were being fired left and right. Government grants and payments were being choked off and reworked into tools of political power and punishment. Trump was signing executive orders demanding the investigation — I would say, the persecution — of his enemies. He had announced shocking tariffs on Mexico and Canada. We were in the [muzzle velocity stage](#) of this presidency. And Democrats seemed completely overwhelmed and outmatched.

I often heard people complain that Democrats lacked a message. What Democrats really lacked was power. They didn't have the House or the Senate, but they did have one sliver of leverage: To fund the government, Senate Republicans needed Democratic votes. And not just one or two. They needed at least seven Democrats to reach that magic 60-vote threshold. House Democrats wanted a shutdown. But Chuck Schumer, the leader of the Senate Democrats, didn't. He voted for the funding bill and encouraged a crucial number of his colleagues to do the same. The bill passed.

To many Democrats, this seemed insane. Some began openly calling for Schumer to resign or face a primary challenge. This was Democrats' first real opportunity to fight back against Trump, and they had folded. What were they good for?

During this period, I talked to Schumer, to House leadership, to members of Congress with different theories of what should be done. I didn't think it was an easy call. The House's argument — Hakeem Jeffries's argument — was that a shutdown creates a crisis. A crisis creates attention. And attention gives Democrats the chance to make their case, to be heard by the American people.

The argument Schumer made was threefold. First, Trump was being stopped in the courts. There were dozens of cases playing out against him, and he was losing again and again and again. Shut down the government, and you might shut down the courts.

Second, DOGE was trying to gut the executive branch. When the government falls into a funding crisis, the executive gets more authority to decide where the money the government does have goes. In that chaos, DOGE could go further and faster.

After all, it's Democrats who want the government to work. It was Trump and DOGE looking for every opportunity to dismantle it. A shutdown wasn't leverage against Trump. It was leverage against the Democrats' own priorities.

Third, the market was quaking at the threat of Trump's tariffs. Trump had promised a strong economy and low prices, and instead he was creating chaos. If Democrats triggered a shutdown at the exact moment Trump was creating an economic crisis, they would confuse who was to blame for the chaos — was it Trump or them? It's the first rule of politics: When your opponents are drowning, do not throw them a lifeline.

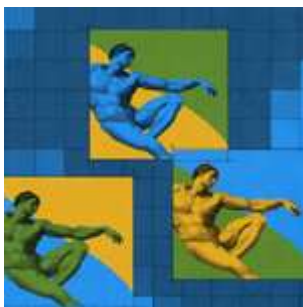
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And I thought there was a fourth argument: Democrats had not prepared for a shutdown. They had not explained why they were shutting the government down or what they wanted to achieve. They had no strategy. They had no message. The demand I was hearing them make was that the spending bill needed more bipartisan negotiation. It was unbearably lame.

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If you had forced me to choose, I would have said Schumer was probably right. It wasn't the time for a shutdown — in part because Democrats weren't prepared to win one.

But the bill that passed back in March funding the government runs out at the end of this month. And so we're facing the question again: Should Senate Democrats partner with Senate Republicans to fund this government?

I don't see how they can.

Not a single argument Schumer made then is valid now. First, Trump is not losing in the Supreme Court, which has weighed in again and again on his behalf. Instead of reprimanding Trump for his executive order unilaterally erasing the 14th Amendment's guarantee of citizenship to all born here, it reprimanded the lower courts for imposing a national freeze on his order in the way they did. It has shown him extraordinary deference to the way he is exercising power. I recently asked Kate Shaw, a law professor at the University of Pennsylvania, what powers the recent Supreme Court decisions seem to grant Trump that Barack Obama or Joe Biden just didn't think they had when they were president.

Here's what she said: "Refuse to spend money appropriated by Congress. Remove heads of independent agencies protected by statute from summary firing. Fire civil servants without cause. Dismantle federal agencies. Call up the National Guard on the thinnest of pretexts. That's a preliminary half-dozen powers."

Obama and Biden, she added, "didn't think they had the power to disregard statutes passed by Congress and the text of the Constitution. They didn't think they had the power to do things like treat the presidency as an office that permits its occupant to use the power of the state to reward friends and punish enemies and engage in self-dealing and enrichment."

Schumer's argument in March was that the courts were stopping Trump; let them do their work. What we can say in September is that no, John Roberts is not going to stop Donald Trump.

Second, the scale of DOGE's assault on the government has shrunk. Trump and Elon Musk went through a messy and public breakup. But the real reason it didn't continue, I suspect, is that it's Trump appointees running these agencies now. They don't want their own agencies wrecked. They don't want to be blamed for the failures that might result. They need staff. And either way, the Supreme Court has given Trump vast power to reshape the federal work force in the way he chooses. He doesn't need a shutdown to do it.

Third, the markets have settled into whatever this new normal is, at least for now. Trump's tariffs are unpopular, but what damage they have done to him politically they have already done or they will do over time, as price increases squeeze Americans. We are not in a recession. The economy is not in chaos. Democrats cannot stand back and hope the markets will do their work for them.

But something else has changed, too. We are no longer in the muzzle velocity stage of this presidency. We are in the authoritarian consolidation stage of this presidency.

I want to be very clear about what I am saying here. Donald Trump is corrupting the government — he is using it to hound his enemies, to line his pockets and to entrench his own power. He is corrupting it the way the Mafia would corrupt the industries it controlled. You could still, under Mafia rule, get the trash picked up or buy construction materials. But the point of those industries had become the preservation and expansion of the Mafia's power and wealth. This is what Trump is doing to the government. This is what Democrats cannot fund. This is what they have to try to stop.

Just in the past few months, we've watched Trump fire the head of the Bureau of Labor Statistics because he didn't like the jobs data. We watched him fire the head of the Defense Intelligence Agency after it suggested that the administration's strike on Iran set its nuclear weapons program back by only months.

We watched him muse about firing Jerome Powell, the chair of the Federal Reserve, and now we're watching him try to fire Lisa Cook, a Federal Reserve governor, for alleged mortgage fraud. We've watched Trump sic his government on Senator Adam Schiff of California and Attorney General Tish James of New York — again, allegations of mortgage fraud. I will note that this is not coming after an exhaustive review of the mortgage documents of every person serving across the executive branch under Trump. This is what authoritarian governments do: Look hard enough, and all people have done something wrong, and even if they haven't, you can cause them a lot of trouble by just saying they have.

We've watched Trump's F.B.I. raid John Bolton's house — Bolton, whom Trump hates because he became a critic of him after serving in his first administration. We've watched Trump threaten to investigate Chris Christie, a former New Jersey governor, after Christie criticized him on television. We've watched the Trump administration force the resignations of Republican prosecutors who would not drop their case against Mayor Eric Adams of New York after the administration seemed to decide it would be more convenient to have Adams in its pocket than defending himself in court. We've watched Trump suggest that the Federal Communications Commission should pull the broadcast licenses for NBC and ABC. Trump has an enemies list, and he is using the power of the federal government to punish and harass his foes.

We've watched the Trump family invest heavily in crypto, even starting its own coins, and then use its political power and fame to funnel in investment. We've watched Trump accept a luxury jet as a gift from Qatar. We've watched, over the past few years, as the Saudis and the Qataris and the Emirates have made huge investments, billions of dollars, in Trump family businesses and crypto coins. We're watching countries like India and Vietnam and Qatar race to build Trump golf courses and towers. In

March, Forbes estimated that Trump's worth had more than doubled, to more than \$5 billion, over the past year. "It pays to be king," Forbes wrote.

We've watched Trump deploy the National Guard to Los Angeles and then to Washington, with more cities expected to come under federal military occupation soon. We've watched masked ICE agents conducting raids all over the country, refusing to reveal badge numbers or warrants. We've watched Trump systematically purge the government of inspectors general, of military JAGs and officers, of federal prosecutors — anyone who might stand in the way of his corruption or his accumulation or exercise of power. It is astonishing that the Jan. 6 rioters have been pardoned and that dozens of the Justice Department lawyers who prosecuted them have been fired.

This is not just how authoritarianism happens. This is authoritarianism happening.

Look at Trump, in his Oval Office festooned with gold, with his masked agents roaming the streets; listen to the cabinet meetings where his appointees compete to lavish him with the kind of praise that would have made Saddam Hussein blush.

Here's Steve Witkoff, Trump's special envoy to the Middle East:

There's only one thing I wish for: that that Nobel Committee finally gets its act together and realizes that you are the single finest candidate since the Nobel Peace award was ever talked about, to receive that award. Your success is game-changing out in the world today and I hope everybody wakes up one day and realizes that.

Tell me this is not what authoritarianism looks and sounds like.

And so the question is: What are Democrats going to do about it? What can they do about it?

I was talking with a Democratic senator I respect, and he asked me a good question: Everything you say about what Trump is doing might be true. Everything you say about the kind of emergency this is might be right. But is a government shutdown the answer? Or is it a desire for emotional catharsis that might be self-defeating? Sometimes the best strategy is restraint.

The case for a shutdown is this: A shutdown is an attentional event. It's an effort to turn the diffuse crisis of Trump's corrupting of the government into an acute crisis that the media, that the public, will actually pay attention to.

Right now, Democrats have no power, so no one cares what they have to say. A shutdown would make people listen. But then Democrats would have to actually win the argument. They would need to *have* an argument. They would need a clear set of demands that kept them on the right side of public opinion and dramatized what is happening to the country right now.

In my head, the argument is something like this: Trump won the election. He is the legitimate president. But the government has to serve the people and be accountable to the people. ICE can conduct legitimate deportations, but there can't be masked agents roaming the streets refusing to identify themselves or their authority. The Trump family cannot be hoovering in money and investments from the countries that depend on us and that fear our power and our sanctions. There have to be inspectors general and JAGs and career prosecutors watching to make sure the government is being run on behalf of the people rather than on behalf of the Trump family.

Democrats would have to pick a small set of policies and stick to that. They would have to choose those policies wisely. They would have to hold the line even when it got tough.

And right now, Democrats have not picked those policies or settled on that message. Right now, they are no more prepared for a shutdown than they were in March. There is a huge debate inside the party on whether they should talk about Trump's corruption and authoritarianism or instead say that armed troops in Washington are a distraction from the price of groceries and health care. And there is the reality that Democrats' best issue is health care, and Trump looting Medicaid to pay for tax cuts is the kind of thing they should never let voters forget. I don't think it's impossible to turn this into one message.

Senator Jon Ossoff of Georgia did a pretty good job of it [back in July](#). "Corruption is why they just defunded nursing homes to cut taxes for the rich," he told a crowd of his supporters. "Corruption is why you pay a fortune for prescriptions. Corruption is why your insurance claim keeps getting denied. Corruption is why hedge funds get to buy up all the houses in your neighborhood, driving you out of the market, and then your corporate landlord ignores your calls during a gas leak. Corruption is why that ambulance costs \$3,000 after you just had to get your choking toddler to the hospital."

"So Trump promised to attack a broken system," Ossoff continued. "I get it. Ripe target. But here's the thing. He's a crook. And a con man. And he wants to be a king. Yes, the system really is rigged, but Trump's not unrigging it. He's re-rigging it for himself."

But Democrats cannot pretend this is a normal Republican administration. They cannot ignore masked agents in the streets, armed troops in the cities, billions of dollars of money going into the Trump family's pockets, an administration that spins off several scandals in a week that would have consumed other presidencies for years. If Democrats cannot make an issue out of all that, then they are screwed and so are we.

And we might be. Even if Democrats could agree on a message, do they have the messengers? Have Hakeem Jeffries and Chuck Schumer distinguished themselves as able to win an argument? Are they going to hold the line as national parks close down, as federal employees are furloughed, if checks stop going out the door, if flights are delayed because air traffic controllers aren't getting paid? I don't know that they will. I am quite certain that this moment deserves real opposition — that Democrats, morally speaking, should not fund a government that Trump is turning into a tool of personal enrichment and power. But I am not certain that Democrats can win a shutdown — I am not certain that they have the leaders that they need. It is absolutely the case that Democrats could lose a shutdown, but whatever they're doing right now, it's not called winning.

According to [Gallup](#), the Democratic Party is polling at 34 percent — its lowest level in the decades that Gallup has been asking the question. The Democratic Party is polling lower than Donald Trump and lower than the Republican Party.

Democrats are this unpopular because their own side is losing faith in them. Before the election, 87 percent of Republicans approved of the Republican Party, and 92 percent of Democrats approved of the Democratic Party. Since then, Republicans' approval of their party has jumped to 91 percent, and Democrats' approval of their party has fallen to 73 percent.

That matters. Enthusiasm matters. Trust matters. Democrats don't just need people to want them to win; they need people willing to help them win. And that's where things are getting tricky. One flashing warning sign is fund-raising: Democrats are [failing](#) to raise money. The Democratic National Committee has been an absolute disaster — at the end of June, it had \$15 million on hand; compare that with the Republican National Committee's \$80 million.

And why would you approve of or donate to the Democratic Party right now? If you are frightened or appalled by what is happening, what are Democrats offering you?

The political scientist Russell Hardin made an argument I think about a lot: Power is a coordination problem. Trump can't do much on his own. The advantage he has is the power to create coordination — he can send clearer signals, he has a louder megaphone, he can wield stronger punishments and rewards.

People do what others do. Each law firm that bent the knee to Trump made it harder for the next firm to say no. The universities that fell to Trump created the same problem — that's why it mattered when Harvard fought back. Everyone in society — every person, every institution — is a node of coordination. And if you look at Democrats in Congress right now, the signal they're sending is not to take any risks. Everything is normal. Just wait for the election. I think sending that signal is a mistake.

The 2026 midterms are 14 months away. The machinery of the state is being organized to entrench Republican power through redistricting, to control information, to punish and harass enemies, to create a masked paramilitary force roaming the streets and carrying out Trump's commands. Do you just let that roll forward and hope for the best?

I'm not going to tell you I am absolutely sure Democrats should shut the government down. I'm not. At the same time, joining Republicans to fund this government is worse than failing at opposition. It's complicity.

I'm not a political strategist. I hope somebody has better ideas than I do. But it's been about six months since Schumer decided that it wasn't the time for a fight, that neither he nor the country was ready. Democratic leaders have had six months to come up with a plan. If there's a better plan than a shutdown, great. But if the plan is still nothing, then Democrats need new leaders.

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