Boehner risks his reputation in Obamacare shutdown

Republican Speaker John Boehner faced a choice between two unappetising gambles on Monday night. One option was to cut a deal with Democrats to continue federal government spending at present levels, and in so doing trigger a revolt from the radical wing of his own party that might end his speakership. The other was to dig in, precipitate a partial shut-down of the government, and risk the public assigning the blame to congressional Republicans.

Caught between grim and grimmer as far as political prospects were concerned, he has gone for option two, and the government shutdown has begun.

While the sudden reality of the derailing of the US government may come as a surprise to some, for regular viewers this represents the feared collision at the end of a long series of games of chicken between the president Barack Obama (and the Democrat-controlled senate) on one side and the Republican House on the other. Since the Republican victory in the 2010 congressional elections, which gave them control of the House, power and influence has steadily accrued in the hands of the radical wing of the party, elected from safe Republican constituencies on the back of a wave of anti-tax, anti-government fundamentalism among the base of primary voters.

Fervent in their ideological antipathy to the president, averse in principle to compromise, and with the only threat to their re-election coming from still-more extreme forces to their right through a primary challenge, the resulting caucus of conservative hardliners has turned the budget process into a series of crises and ultimatums.

Over the past three years there have been several moments of last-minute bullet-dodging, when Congress has threatened to shut down the government or – worse still – refuse to raise the **debt ceiling (https://theconversation.com/stakes-are-high-in-the-upcoming-vote-on-the-debt-ceiling-11575)** and thus precipitate default on US debts already acquired, with these outcomes only being avoided through compromise at the death.

In this, the radicals have been aided by Speaker Boehner's efforts to abide by the so-called **Hastert rule (http://washingtonexaminer.com/the-hastert-rule-according-to-dennis-hastert/article/2536140)**, whereby legislation should only be allowed to come up for a vote when it can be passed with a majority consisting entirely of Republican votes.

A battle for the Republican soul

The present impasse over spending could be resolved swiftly if Democrats and moderate Republicans were permitted to combine their vote through a continuing resolution extending current spending. But to do so would enrage the radicals in and outside Congress and thus put Boehner's leadership at risk. In that sense, what is playing out at present represents not a stand-off between the two parties, but rather a battle within the Republican Party between those who consider compromise with the other side an inherent evil and those who regard it as the inevitable price of keeping government functional.

The specific ground on which the radicals have chosen to make their stand this time is Obamacare, the large healthcare reform voted through by Democratic majorities during Obama's first term and due to take effect this year. Unless its implementation is suspended for a year (by which time Republicans hope to have won the votes in the senate for its full repeal), the House refuses to approve any further government spending.

Since it is the president's signature legislative achievement, and since acquiescence would in effect mean granting the House the right to dictate terms to the rest of the government through the power of budgetary blackmail, there is near zero possibility of presidential or senatorial assent to these demands. Indeed, since Republicans' **list of demands (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/27/us/politics/house-gop-leaders-list-conditions-for-raising-debt-ceiling.html?src=me)** for raising the debt limit in effect amount to implementing the manifesto of Mitt Romney, there is good reason for other branches of government to see the current row as one part of an outlandish power-grab on the part of an extreme group within one half of the legislature.

Closed for business

What does the "shutdown" of the federal government mean in the immediate term? In practice, it doesn't mean we should expect planes to start colliding in the skies or unmanned border posts to be overrun. "Essential" workers can legally be retained in service with the hope of back pay when the crisis is resolved. But as **this chart (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2013/09/27/us/who-goes-to-work-during-government-shutdown.html?_r=0)** illustrates it does mean hundreds of thousands of government staff parked at home indefinitely without pay, many government offices shuttered, and millions of dollars of government spending and contracting cancelled or suspended.

This is bad for many reasons, but two have particular weight. While some activities may be "non-essential" in the very short term, many of these government activities provide services which over time the public will increasingly miss. The military may remain in place and welfare administration may not have stopped dead, but as time goes on the closure of permit offices, national parks and parts of the justice system, to name but a few examples, will begin to be felt by more and more of the population as they try and fail to access them.

Second, government spending is a vital component in the overall US economy, and has been even more so in recent years as the financial crisis and recession brought the private sector to its knees. While there have been tentative signs of recovery, the sudden withdrawal of huge tranches of government spending from circulation – both from the pockets of direct employees and from the vast number of individuals and businesses who rely on government contracts for their living – will deliver a major shock to the economy. The precise consequences are unknowable, but the short and definite version of what consequences it implies is: nothing good.

The great gamble

A key component in conventional thinking about the prospect of government shutdown until this moment has been the memory that last time it occurred. In 1995, congressional Republicans under the leadership of Newt Gingrich were blamed by the public for unreasonable behaviour, providing Bill Clinton with the opportunity to rebuild his own agenda and popularity.

The assumption has been that Republicans today would wish to avoid a shutdown for fear of a repeat of the same outcome. As it transpires, they have proven prepared to take their chances. That may be because they have reached an informed view that this time they can pass the blame to the president more successfully. Or it may be because radicals Republicans are sufficiently ideologically adamant, and have sufficiently little to lose personally by taking a hard-line posture, that they simply don't care about the consequences and have drawn a line on principle.

Boehner, at least, and his Republican leadership counterpart in the senate Mitch McConnell, will be painfully aware of the risk they are taking with the party's image. If the public shows signs of being as unforgiving in its assessment of Republican actions as some have foretold, then he will be forced to revisit his bleak choice between the radicals whose support he relies upon, and the centre-ground of public opinion his party needs if it aspires to future electoral victories at the national level.

Dr Adam Quinn (/staff/profiles/government-society/quinn-adam.aspx) is Senior Lecturer in International Politics at University of Birmingham. *This article first appeared in **The Conversation (http://theconversation.com/uk)** on 1 October 2013.*

© University of Birmingham 2014