

WHAT IS A CONTINUING RESOLUTION

A Brief Guide

A Continuing Resolution (CR) is a temporary funding measure passed by Congress to keep the federal government open when lawmakers cannot agree on the regular annual spending bills in time. Think of it as Congress hitting the “extend deadline” button so the lights stay on and federal agencies can keep operating.

Each fiscal year, Congress is supposed to pass 12 appropriations bills to fund government agencies—from the Department of Defense to the Department of Education—by October 1, when the new federal budget year begins. Ideally, these appropriation bills are passed through the regular appropriations process, passed by the House & Senate, and signed by the President. When that deadline approaches and the bills still are not finished, Congress uses a CR to avoid a shutdown.

A CR is essentially Congress saying: “We aren’t done negotiating the budget, but we agree to keep spending at last year’s levels for now.”

How a CR works:

Continuing Resolutions generally do three main things:

1. **Keep federal funding at current or near-current levels.** Most CRs simply extend last year’s funding levels (“current rate”), preventing agencies from getting new programs or major changes until Congress passes full appropriations.
2. Set an expiration date. **CRs are temporary.** They often last a few days, a few weeks, or sometimes several months. If Congress still hasn’t finished the budget by the expiration date, they must pass another CR or face a shutdown.
3. **Include limited exceptions called “anomalies.”** These are small, targeted adjustments—like allowing a program to increase spending slightly, start a new activity required by law, or prevent a critical shortfall.

How Often are CRs Used?

CRs used to be relatively rare. Today, they are routine. Since the late 1970s, Congress has passed at least one CR in almost every fiscal year. In some years, the government has operated under CRs for months, and sometimes for most of the fiscal year. The increased use can reflect growing partisan polarization, larger and more complex budgets, few congressional workdays dedicated to appropriations, leadership gridlock, or difficulty reaching bipartisan compromises before deadlines. Simply put, CRs have become a common tool because Congress often struggles to complete its regular appropriations process on time.

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Short History of CRs

CRs emerged in the mid-20th century as occasional tools when Congress fell behind schedule. But major changes came with the Congressional Budget and Impoundment Control Act of 1974, which created the modern budget process and set October 1 as the start of the fiscal year.

Ironically, the reform meant to streamline budgeting also made CRs more necessary when Congress failed to meet its new deadlines. They have become a hallmark of Congress's budget dysfunction.

Why CRs Matter

CRs prevent immediate chaos. They keep national security agencies functioning, ensure Social Security checks go out, and maintain federal services.

However, they come with costs:

- Agencies cannot plan long-term.
- They operate month-to-month, blocking new hires, major contracts, and new programs.
- The military is especially affected.
- CRs can delay training cycles, equipment upgrades, and readiness activities.
- No new initiatives can start.
- CRs freeze spending at old levels—even if Congress has already agreed that new priorities or emergencies need funding.
- They mask deeper political gridlock.
- CRs are a band-aid; the underlying disagreements remain unresolved.

Still, CRs offer short-term stability when the alternative is a government shutdown.

Bottom Line

A Continuing Resolution is Congress's temporary fix to keep the government funded when the full-year budget is not ready. While CRs prevent shutdowns and ensure essential services continue, they also reflect chronic gridlock and make federal agencies operate with uncertainty. They have become a regular feature of the modern budget landscape—used nearly every year—and understanding them is key to understanding how Congress manages (and struggles with) its core responsibility: funding the government.

References

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