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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

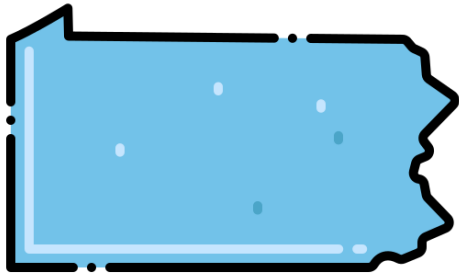
Tuesday, September 26, 2023

Perceptions of a Government
Shutdown Among Independents
& Soft Democrats



Methodology

On September 18 and 20, 2023, GBAO conducted four focus groups: two online groups among Democrats in Pennsylvania and Michigan who are not very strong in their party affiliation, and two in-person groups in Nebraska with pure independents and Democratic-leaning independents. All participants reported following politics at least somewhat closely and had heard at least a little about a potential government shutdown.



Soft Democrats in Pittsburgh,
Pennsylvania



Soft Democrats in Detroit,
Michigan



Independents and Democratic-
leaning independents (one among
women, one among men) in
Omaha, Nebraska

Key Takeaways

- Awareness and worry about the shutdown are mixed.
- Yet, the shutdown is a symbol of a broken government influenced by special interests.
- After hearing more information about recent events in Washington, most find it credible that MAGA Republicans are holding the process hostage.
- Impeachment, abortion, gay marriage, and finishing a border wall seem “not connected” to the budget.
- Proposed budget cuts to programs—like Social Security, nutrition assistance, and education in particular—stir anger and frustration.

Voters Have Modest Awareness of a Looming Shutdown

Moderator: What have you heard recent about a potential government shutdown?

"I don't know too many details. I do know October 1st is the date that we all need to be aware of." – PA man

"I haven't heard of this government shutdown, but I've heard of them in the past. I've lived through them, experienced them." – PA man

"I'm terrified [of a government shutdown]... Speaker Kevin McCarthy... is facing a lot of pressure. I hate to take it politically, but it is what it is. They want [an] impeachment proceeding against Biden because of his son, Hunter Biden, and **some of the extremists are saying that if they don't come to a stop gap measure for spending over these extreme politics and impeachment proceedings**, seems like they're trying to get back for what's going on with former President Trump being indicted." – PA woman



[Moderator: What are you concerned might happen in the next two months?] "There's the government shut down, but then there's also the rising prices and the auto strike. Need to buy a car for my daughter, and I'm like, 'Oh, do we do it now? Can we afford it in a month?'" – NE woman



But Knowledge of its Impact is Widespread—Particularly the Effects on the Vulnerable and the Broader Economy

Moderator: What happens when the government shuts down?

“Government employees stop getting paid.” – MI woman

“All the federal employee jobs get shut down and **everyone starts to blame each other** for the reasons why until it gets to a point where it really starts to affect the voters. You can't get your assistance, or it affects your lottery or affects all the things that we're accustomed to. That's when they usually come together and try to work something out. But it's always a big blame game, and it's, again, it hurts everybody who's not of the 1%, the most. It's sad.” – MI man

“It's scary that basic services might not be available. If we need to renew our driver's license, if someone elderly needs to go get their healthcare or Social Security checks, I just think it's really scary. Or our kids' education might get interrupted. **It's terrifying.**” – PA woman

“I remember from past shutdowns **it was surprising some of the government services that you couldn't access.** So, some of the online services that I used for work, like databases and stuff weren't available. It was surprising just how much everything shut down when the government shut down, so in even small ways.” – PA woman

“**You might not get your food stamps for some reason,** or you might be delayed in getting your driver's license or registration. Basic things might be delayed that normally would be, you could get like that, you're not going to get. There could be a whole bunch of things that a government shut down, even for a few days or a week, even when there's shutdowns, they only lasted maybe a few days, but that could **cause a lot of havoc in people's lives.**” – PA man

“**Anything that the government touches, if they shut down is done.** And I think it's a lot more sometimes than I'm aware of.” – NE woman

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Most Initially Dismiss a Shutdown as Something that “Happens All the Time” and “Not as Urgent” as Other Pressing Issues

“It just feels like the same old dance.” – NE man

“I don't mean it's not important, but it seems like it does happen every year and it goes down to the final moment.” – NE woman

“It would be disappointing, but honestly, wouldn't be surprising. So, I'm in the middle. Yeah, if they're talking about it then it could be a reality, but I don't think, it hasn't been anything pressing in my circle.” – PA man

“Yes, it's a problem, but I think they wait till the deadline, just like the automotive strike that's going on right now. They just wait the deadline until the pressure's hot before they actually start working on what really needs to be done.” – MI woman

“I guess what I've heard is this is sort of the new norm, right? We just went through this not too long ago and that this is sort of the new political bargaining tool on each side.” – MI woman

“I just think that nobody mentioned it because everything feels so urgent right now. **Everything feels urgent.** It's hard to prioritize what thing is going to be the most urgent that day. It seems like we're always being hit by these random missiles of like, this is going to happen this day. This could happen in two weeks. The pandemic's coming back, your grocery budget has to triple, you might lose your house. Everything is crazy. And it's just like, that's just another thing. **It's just another thing. We're just very used to it.**” – MI woman



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For Many, an Impending Shutdown Is a Symbol of a Broken Government

“It concerns me because it shows what a sad state our country is in, if we can't even agree upon things. We have to be open. The Congress and everybody else, they have to figure out how to work together. They're not doing a very good job, and I think it makes a bad impression for the United States.” – PA woman

“I used to have some trust in the parties that I supported... I used to have trust in the candidates, and I have lost trust, and I almost feel like when we said what is democracy for the people, I really don't feel like I have a voice anymore, and so I **have no control. It feels awful...** I'll always vote. I'll always take a stance, but yet I feel like for the first time ever in my life, I **don't feel like my voice and my vote's really going to go anywhere. So, I have lost credit and respect for Congress. I just don't feel like they're doing it the right way.** They're [not] approaching things the right way. They're [not] going to talk the right way. They're [not] going to have the interest of the people at heart. I just don't.”
– MI man

“It feels like **a new age political chicken** and more divisive than anything, just for divisive sake. And then none of them are paying the price. **The people who have to make these decisions are not the one paying the price.** They aren't going to go without their groceries. They aren't going to go without any help they need ever.”
– MI woman

“**It feels like toddlers,** I'm going to take my ball and go home unless you come back here. And again, that makes me dislike all these members of Congress.” – NE woman

“**I think our government is so divided.** Until it's like the last minute will they ever come to any consensus, **and I think they're just wasting so much time fighting...**” - NE woman

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While Some See Both Parties as Unwilling to Compromise, Republicans Get the Brunt of the Blame

"I think the reason why is you have the [lack of] bipartisanship. That's why you would have a shutdown. **Neither side can agree.** They want to have their side and no one wants to meet in the middle. Certain things they'll meet in the middle for, but when it comes to things like economy and who gets what... someone's on welfare or someone isn't dah, dah, dah, dah. It's so separated." – PA man

"I feel as if it may be the Republican Party making it a little more difficult than the Democratic Party." – PA woman

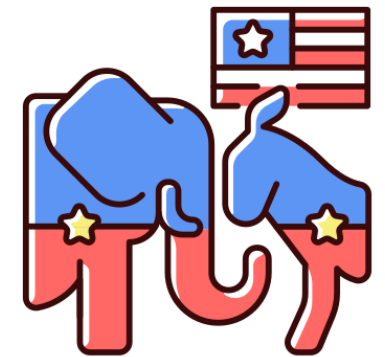
"Democrats seems to be the ones in charge now, so they want to keep the flag flying, but **Republicans feel like, 'Hey, we always going to be the one to call the shots.'**" – PA woman

"I think **the Speaker of the House isn't doing the job** and making them focus on the things that are at hand." – MI woman

"I think that the Democrats are closer to center left, not radical left. I think Republicans have traditionally been that way. **Right now, we have radical right, a lot of radical right, and they're actually controlling it.** The Speaker of the House, poor guy, who should have never gotten into that position, but right now they're putting massive pressure." – NE woman

"It's both sides where they just can't reach an agreement. A mutual... I mean, there's such a divide between Republicans and Democrats. I mean, it's like they never can agree, but **I think it's more Republicans.**" – NE woman

"Again, I think it's **everybody's**, all elected officials' **responsibility to do what they can to compromise**, but I definitely think one party is more difficult than another." – NE man



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A “Tit for Tat” Impeachment Proceeding Is Seen as Both Misguided and Irrelevant

“The impeachment proceeding is a vindictive effort... the shutdown is the shutdown and is affecting 330 million people” – NE man

“I don't think that it's anything really regarding him per se. I think they're really trying to go after his son and because there's an upcoming election, they want to make it hard for him to get reelected again.” – NE woman

“There's no grounds for it, they just want it. It's kind of tit-for-tat. We've gotten to the point where it's more personalities and not what's good for the country.” – NE woman

“They're pushing to have an impeachment inquiry on Biden... **so they be the one to say, 'Yeah, we said this, and we got that.'** And just keep being in power, unfortunately.” – PA woman

“Like, ‘Oh, I'll vote if you do this impeachment inquiry.’ **It sounds petty rather than productive** for the country.” – PA man

“I don't think it would work to say, ‘**Well, if we impeach him, then we'll agree to this.**’ I don't think it's going to work. It's just more infighting over what? Over a citizen. Really, his son is not even a congressman or anything. He's just a normal Joe Blow citizen.” – PA man

“It makes me think **they don't have the interest of the whole population in mind.** It's just more politics than what will benefit the people.” – PA woman

“There's nothing wrong with transparency. I mean, that's fine. Investigate who you need to, but to use that to say that, ‘We're only going to pass a budget if you do this,’ and then they'll do that. And is the budget going to get passed? No. So, it's not even accurate. But if that was the case, yeah, impeach me. Whatever you need to do to get this budget passed, fine. **But it's just a ploy. They're not even serious about it.**” – MI man

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Trading Abortion Medication or Gay Marriage for a Budget Deal Sounds “Stupid” and Confounds Participants

“It sounds so stupid... how does that even affect everything that's the problem too?” – PA man

“But they're supposed to be representing the people. You know what I'm saying? If it's a service that you're taking away from people, it's not a political meet-in-the-middle. It's a direct service to people. I don't think most people would compromise on taking things away from people in order to keep the government running.” – PA man

“In my opinion, I don't think that would work well in the Republicans' favor because, when *Roe vs. Wade* got overturned, the big red wave that they thought they were going to get last year didn't happen the way they thought it was. So... to sit there and pull a gun, say, ‘If you don't get rid of this, we won't do your [budget]’... I don't think it will work in their favor.” – PA man

“It's like holding them hostage. It's like beating them up with one thing that has nothing to do with the other, to gain control on it. To get what they want one way or another, even though it really... it doesn't really go along with the budget and the shutdown. It's just control.” – MI woman

“I feel like the minorities, the last two questions you've asked have to do with minority, whether it's women's rights, right? Or if it's, you said same sex, right? That's another consider minority, right? **It's like, who are we going to pick on now? What are we going to dangle? It's just too much power... just control is out of hand.**” – MI man

“It's not trading toys on a playground.” – NE man

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Proposed Cuts in Exchange for Agreement on the Budget Shown to Participants

- a) Cuts to the Social Security Administration, which could double wait times for those applying for disability benefits
- b) Cuts to food assistance for kids and families who can't afford basic groceries
- c) Cuts to K-12 education, impacting 26 million students and forcing cuts of over 200,000 teachers, aides, and other school professionals
- d) Cuts to funding to provide safe and clean drinking water and to protect children from lead poisoning.
- e) Cuts to housing assistance programs for low-income families, opening the door to evictions during the holiday season
- f) Cuts to funding for local and federal law enforcement, including the FBI, and programs to protect children from violence and find missing children
- g) Cuts to election security grants and voter registration programs, making elections less safe and making it harder to vote
- h) Cuts to the investigations needed to go after wealthy tax cheats and big corporations who are not paying their fair share in taxes

Specific Cuts—Like Education—Incite Deep Anger and Frustration For The Impact On People's Lives

"It's shocking. These, of all the areas that you can cut, this is the area that you would choose to cut? It's shocking, and it's ignorant because a lot of these social safety nets actually cost a lot less money than the alternative. If we don't feed children, they're going to enter the system. The system is expensive, and it's broken. If we don't house families and they're homeless, it costs a lot more money to get people out of homelessness than it does to just help keep them in homes. I can't even believe that they would be able to campaign on these talking points, **cutting money for people**. It's shocking." – MI woman

"It feels like we're living in a dystopian hellscape, and if the choice is cut those things, which should be the things that the country stands on and says with their whole chest that they want to do for their citizens, so **if those are the things that they want to cut, yeah, shut it all down. Flip it over. Start it over. Well, we're done. We're cooked. We're good for it because where do we have to go from there? No humanity.**" – MI woman

"A lot of people depend on different programs for them to be able to get access to food. If it's through EBT, or a Bridge Card, some people really just don't have the expenses or the financial stability to be able to provide food for their kids and what they have, whoever's living in their environment or their space. **To cut that, that would be very heartbreaking.**" – MI man

"I just think **these are human rights** that we're not even taking care of. It's not even like a privilege or anything of that sort. People need water; water's a natural resource. I just don't understand how we got to this **desperate level in our country. It's very sad to me.**" – PA woman

"A lot of Republicans call themselves Christians. I'm a Christian, and **it makes no sense that they want to cut these programs to where we reach out to the poor.**" – NE man

"I would never compromise **human rights.**" – PA man

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Majorie Taylor Greene is Almost Universally Reviled

Moderator: What are your thoughts on Marjorie Taylor Greene?



"She's been kicked out of so many committees, it's not been funny and stuff. You just wonder how she gets voted in." – PA man

"Everything that comes out of her mouth seems to be uneducated and negative, so I tune out almost anything that's coming from her now." – MI woman

"It's just scary that there's people like that that have that much control." – NE woman

"From what I've heard about her is just not how I would expect politicians to act in the sense that she makes wild accusations, she doesn't seem to really know what she's doing." – NE man



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“MAGA Republican Extremists are Holding the Party Hostage” is Particularly Credible

Messaging statement shown to participants: Republican MAGA extremists are holding their own party and the government hostage. By refusing to agree to any sort of spending agreement unless it makes drastic cuts, they are making it harder for our government to function and making our government and economy more unstable.

“There's one particular guy that I can think of, that I feel like he's been railroading a bunch of negotiations for one specific thing that he just will not negotiate on.” – NE woman

“I think they honestly do more in terms of creating a panic or making people worried than actually trying to advance things and do their job.” – NE man

“Because they're utilizing a lot of pressure on the Speaker of the House to shut things down, and it's preventing a stop gap bill that was to stop a shut down by September 30th. So sadly, probably a lot of these same folks were behind the insurrection and the break in of the White House. It's scary stuff.” – PA woman

“I know [Kevin McCarthy is] trying not to get recalled by his people. So, he is trying to negotiate [with the] far right just to come up with a plan that the Republicans would agree to, which would never be agreed to by the Democratic side. In general, he's not really going to be able to do much.” – MI man

“They're extremists... their way or the highway. They're going to be kind of the root cause kind of whatever. If it drags on, the shutdown, it's going to be because they have that mentality, the MAGA mentality and they're the Trump groupies.” – MI man

“We have a Speaker of the House who is beholden to a very right-wing minority. He backed himself into a corner. We're seeing some of that play out now.” – MI woman

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These Voters Question Members' Motives and Authenticity

Moderator: If you could ask a member of Congress anything about the shutdown, and they had to take a truth serum, what would you ask them and what do you think they would say?

"I would ask if they really believe that this would benefit the people... if they were on truth serum, then they would say the truth. No, it does not benefit the people." – MI woman

"I would ask, 'Do you believe the words you're saying? Do you believe it with your whole heart?' [I think] a lot of them would say no. I think they have so few scruples that they'll just say out loud, 'This is what I believe,' because it's what's going to line their pockets or be in their best interest." – MI woman

"I would want to know why they aren't doing their job or why they are in Congress if it isn't to make this country a better place. I think a lot of them would say, 'Well, because I get a pension for the rest of my life. I just have to work for a little while, and I can make a bigger impact on what my peers want by digging my feet in.'" – MI woman

"What are you guys thinking? So, some of these cuts that they're dragging, like safe, clean, drinking water. Seriously?" – PA woman

"I would want for them to explain to me the correlation between whoever is President and the budget... like how does Biden being President affect you balancing the budget?" – NE woman

"It just seems that our politicians don't work for us. They work for their investors and their benefactors, and that's part of where that divisiveness comes from. And that's why their priorities aren't right, because I truly don't think they care about us or have our best interests at heart." – NE man



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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Jessica Floyd, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds, EMILY's List; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

About the Study

GBAO conducted four focus groups September 18 and 20, 2023. Two were conducted online with Democrats in Pittsburgh, PA and Detroit, MI, who are not strong in their party affiliation, and two were in-person with independents and Democratic-leaning independent women and men in Omaha, NE. All participants reported following politics at least somewhat closely, and had heard at least a little about a potential government shutdown. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

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