

From VOA Learning English, this is In the News.

This week, a political dispute in Washington led to a partial shutdown of the United States government for the first time in almost 20 years. Agencies sent home more than 800,000 workers -- about one-third of the federal work force.

The new budget year began Tuesday, October 1. But Republicans in Congress blocked even short-term spending for many government operations. They demanded that Democrats change the Affordable Care Act, the new health care law often called Obamacare. The Democrats refused.

The shutdown did not stop Tuesday's launch of online marketplaces, called exchanges, at the center of the law. The federal government and states started websites for millions of uninsured Americans to buy health plans or pay a tax penalty.

Opponents of Obamacare say it will force people and small businesses to buy insurance policies against their will.

At the heart of the dispute is a clash between the two major political parties over the role of the central government in American life.

The political fighting between Democrats and Republicans began to intensify during the 1990s. That followed the election of Democrat Bill Clinton as president. Differences over spending and the role of government led to two government shutdowns.

The disputed presidential election of 2000 brought Republican George W. Bush to office. University of Virginia expert Larry Sabato says the political battles only deepened during his second term.

“There is no question that the polarization increased first with the Bush presidency, because of the Iraq war and his handling of Hurricane Katrina. Then it accelerated once President Obama was elected.”

divide grew wider when President Barack Obama pushed his health care reform law through Congress in 2010 without a single Republican vote. That in turn helped to fuel the rise of Tea Party groups around the country. The Tea Party is a conservative voting group within the Republican Party.

Republicans have made several attempts to either defund the Affordable Care Act or delay it. The law is one of the most important acts of Barack Obama's presidency.

Peter Brown of Quinnipiac University in Connecticut studies public opinion.

"Republicans like smaller government and lower government spending and therefore are more opposed to Obamacare. Democrats tend to be more supportive in general of government solutions to problems, and they see Obamacare as the right thing to do to help on the health care issue."

Currently, Republicans control the House of Representatives; Democrats hold the Senate and the White House.

group of conservative Republicans in the House have been leading the opposition to the health care law. Many of them now depend on strong support from Tea Party activists to get elected. Larry Sabato says many of them are willing, at least for now, to accept the political blame for forcing the government to shut down.

“They will pay a bigger price, but they seem willing to pay it in part because most of their members are in completely safe [congressional] districts. The only thing they have to worry about is a challenge from the right in the Republican primary. So they do not want to let anybody get to their right.”

For the moment, Larry Sabato sees no quick end to the shutdown.

“They are so deeply polarized by party and by institution that it is difficult to see, if people stick to the principles they have articulated, how this is going to be resolved. It could go on and on. And of course it will do tremendous damage, not just to our economy but to our image around the world.”

Political observer Charlie Cook says some of the Republican opposition is also driven by deep feelings against President Obama.

“There are a lot of Republicans where if President Obama said ‘up,’ they would say ‘down.’”

The last politically driven government shutdown began in December of 1995. It lasted three weeks.

And right now there is another issue. Congress will soon have to raise the borrowing limit or risk the United States not being able to make all of its loan payments. Congress must renew the government's power to borrow money by October 17 or risk a first-ever federal default.

And that's In the News from VOA Learning English. I'm Avi Arditti.

—

Contributing: Jim Malone