

The shutdown shows why governing by symbol doesn't work

The border wall means a lot to Trump. It means very little for public policy.

From the Editors in the [February 13, 2019](#) issue



Border wall prototypes near the Otay Mesa port of entry. Photo by Mani Albrecht / U.S. Customs and Border Protection Office of Public Affairs.

A border wall is a cruel symbol, reflecting some of America's worst instincts. It's also an effective symbol: it captures starkly the notion that national boundaries must be fiercely protected from outsiders. As a candidate, Donald Trump used this symbol to powerful effect, rallying anti-immigration voters to his cause.

But a political symbol is not public policy. Lawmakers understand this, and even those who share Trump's anti-immigration views seem to appreciate the reality: a

wall isn't an effective way to keep people out. When Trump and Senate Democrats reached a tentative deal for the wall a year ago, House conservatives soon scuttled it. With their attention focused not on Fox News but on legislating, they made it clear that the wall wasn't important enough to trade anything for it.

Now Trump has decided to shut down the federal government until Congress funds his favorite symbol. But the symbolic wall is a top priority only for Trump. If conservative lawmakers had shared the president's fixation, they had two years to offer Democrats something big in exchange for it.

Shutdowns get worse as they go on, and this is the longest one yet. Airline safety standards are compromised. People on housing assistance might be evicted. Local officials can't get good data about flood conditions, and farmers can't get loans. Hundreds of thousands of federal workers are either furloughed or working without pay. It's painful.

It's also a crisis of the president's own making. While Trump is hardly the first politician to campaign with big, aggressive symbols, he has proven uniquely resistant to shifting from campaigning to the practical work of governing. Those who cautioned us not to take Trump's sloganeering literally—that "build a wall" really meant something like "enact tough, practical border security measures"—were wrong. The president has gone all in on campaign symbolism, choosing an applause line over the realities of his job.

A political symbol is not public policy.

Divided government is inevitably contentious. It requires a base level of cooperation just to keep the lights on. Typically the parties put some policy items on the table and eventually reach a deal. But it's very difficult to negotiate with a symbol. A symbol isn't aimed at policy outcomes that can be dialed up or down—that's not its work. Symbols evoke ideas and stir deep emotions. Governing deals in nuts and bolts.

For a president to commit so completely to a symbol strains the basic workings of democracy. Negotiations continue, but it's not clear what deal there is to be made when the president's own party doesn't share his top priority and the opposition party firmly rejects it. There's only Trump, alone at the half-shuttered White House, holding everyone hostage over a symbol that matters mostly just to him.

A version of this article, which was edited January 25, appears in the print edition under the title "Government by slogan."