There have been 21 government shutdowns since the 1970s. What if America never went through another one? Some lawmakers think they have a solution: “automatic continuing resolutions.” Auto-CR’s would be exempt from the appropriations process and ensure governmental operations would continue even if Congress can’t pass spending bills.

In the aftermath of the longest shutdown in U.S. history, that probably sounds like a good idea. Auto-CR’s could protect federal workers from losing their jobs, stop the partial shutdowns that have become routine, and maintain the power of the purse. Over the past 1980, most federal functions continued to operate, but it was inefficient. In 1980, Congress appropriated $37 billion for the government’s annual operating costs. In 1989, it appropriated $119 billion. Auto-CR’s could drive out waste and redundancy, but they’d also increase spending, since the appropriators process would be crowded out. Yet since the last shutdown ended, appropriations bills have been introduced to provide funds for an auto-CR and Congress has put it on its budget calendar. The concept of an auto-CR is not new. Prior to 1976, leaders of the Senate and House reached an agreement to bypass the appropriations process when the need was dire. This system worked for a while. But if Congress no longer had to pass annual funding bills to keep government running, it might be tempted to shirk its legislative and oversight responsibilities and spend more money on things not germane to governance.

But if Congress no longer had to pass annual funding bills to keep government running, it might be tempted to shirk its legislative and oversight responsibilities and spend more money on things not germane to governance. Auto-CRs could cause the government’s power to list and force the government to spend money on programs that Congress has decided to stop or keep. Auto-CR’s could increase spending, since the appropriators process would be crowded out.

There are potential benefits to having an auto-CR. But there are just as many downsides. First, all spending, auto-CR or not, would be subject to the annual appropriations process. Congress is supposed to pass all spending bills individually and by October 1, each year. That hasn’t happened in 25 years. Assuming that the government won’t shut down if a budget hasn’t passed Congress could appropriate funds in an auto-CR to continue spending levels and provide oversight, but it would be a separate piece of legislation. The results could be bad news for taxpayers, because it’s impossible to distinguish between what’s necessary to run the government and what’s not. Instead of taking the easy way out and deferring spending battles, Congress should follow the law and enact budget cuts that are based on sound budgetary principles on the law.

Is there a clear definition of spending? Is, Congress can appropriate emergency funding for the government to pay its bills. But this would allow Congress to pay its bills without new legislation. Some lawmakers think they have a solution: “automatic continuing resolutions.” Auto-CR’s would be exempt from the appropriations process and ensure governmental operations would continue even if Congress can’t pass spending bills.