Social Scientists use models to help them understand and predict behavior. Sometimes the model fits the situation that we wish to analyze perfectly. In this case, we can apply the model in a straightforward way. Other times, we have to modify the model so that it fits the situation that we are trying to explain. These modifications can demand a great bit of creativity and they represent how there is an artistic or creative element to doing scientific work.

The Chicken Game is the model that offers the best chance of helping us make sense of the current partial government shutdown. The Chicken Game can be explained with an analogy. There are two drivers who want to prove that they are macho (brave). These drivers start on opposite ends of a road and they drive toward each other at high speeds. The driver who "chickens out" turns his car to avoid hitting the other car, and he is shamed and considered to be a wimp. The driver, who continues driving in a straight line, proves himself to be macho and he wins the game.

The biggest danger in this game is that if both drivers continue to go straight, there is a crash that will probably cost them their lives. Either driver will turn if he believes the other driver will go straight. As you can imagine, one driver may promise that he will go straight no matter what the other driver does. His promise is not believable since a driver will turn his car from the straight path if it looks like a crash is about to occur. Ironically, a driver can make himself better off by eliminating the option of turning. If a driver rips out his steering wheel and holds it up in the air so his opponent can see it, his promise to drive straight becomes credible – since he cannot turn without a steering wheel. The driver who still has a steering wheel will see the antics of the other driver and turn to avoid a crash since knows that his opponent cannot turn.

The standard Game of Chicken does not neatly apply to the current government shutdown. In the standard version of the game, both players want to avoid a crash. In the current situation, a prolonged government shutdown is like a crash. The shutdown conflict differs from the standard Chicken Game because one party may want a crash. The democrats want a shutdown if they think the voters will blame the republicans for it. Likewise, the republicans want a prolonged shutdown if the voters will blame the democrats for it. The party that avoids being blamed for the shutdown will do well in the next election. In contrast, the party that is blamed will suffer a huge defeat in the next election.

Suppose the voters will blame the republicans for the shutdown. In this case, the vehicles in the story should be changed so that the game fits this situation. In the modified version of the game, the democrats are driving a tank and the republicans are driving a tricycle. It is clear what will happen. The democrats will continue going straight because a crash does not harm them and they win by going straight. The republicans will turn to avoid a crash since they will be crushed by the tank.

We are still early in this faceoff. Each party believes that voters will blame the other party for the shutdown. However, as time passes, polling numbers will clearly show which party is being blamed. Once a party sees the polling data and realizes they are on the tricycle, this party will "chicken out" and give in on the standoff that led to the shutdown.

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