After 16 days of closed museums, half-empty federal buildings, unnaturally quiet streets, and tens of thousands of workers left in existential limbo, the lights are back on in Washington. But, while the shutdown of the United States government, initiated by radical congressional Republicans seeking to block implementation of President Barack Obama’s health-care legislation, is over – at least for now – three enduring lessons have emerged.

First, the next time the eurozone crisis flares up, the US will simply have to bite its tongue; after all, the shutdown spectacle revealed pathologies no less severe than those that have characterized the European Union’s economic and political negotiations over the past five years. Irresponsible behavior threatening the health of the global economy? Check. Political posturing and outlandish claims foreclosing any possibility of compromise? Check. Breathtaking brinkmanship and 11th-hour decision-making leaving all bystanders wondering whether this time the cart might in fact go over the cliff? Check.

Few countries in recent years have been spared the pain of their domestic political spectacles being broadcast around the world. The United Kingdom had mass riots in London just two summers ago; strikes and demonstrations have paralyzed Paris on a regular basis; Greece has a rising fascist party; Mexico City has been practically shut down by teachers occupying the central square; and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan resorted to violence in June to quell weeks of protests against his increasingly autocratic ways. Among non-democracies, China had the Bo Xilai scandal, which was worthy of a spy novel, with illicit affairs, rampant corruption, murder, and a senior police official’s dramatic quest for asylum in a US consulate.

Against this backdrop, the US government shutdown looks a little different. Yes, it was a clear symptom of deep political dysfunction, stemming from the politicized demarcation of electoral districts and the distorting effects of America’s campaign-finance system. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that the entire crisis played out according to constitutional rules.

Indeed, as the deadline for raising the debt ceiling neared, Henry Aaron, a distinguished senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, pointed out that the US Constitution requires the president “to spend what Congress has instructed him to spend, to raise only those taxes Congress has authorized him to impose, and to borrow no more than Congress authorizes.” Honoring all three of those legal obligations simultaneously is impossible if Congress refuses to raise the debt ceiling, but raising the debt ceiling without Congressional approval, though illegal and an impeachable offense, was the least-bad choice.

Even in the face of deeper political polarization than the US has seen in many decades (and, in many places, a visceral hatred of the country’s first African-American president), Americans and their politicians understand that breaking the rules means dissolving the constitutional glue that holds the polity together. This understanding means that the cure for the current dysfunction will
be found at the ballot box rather than in the streets. And it is this collective commitment to the law governing how political power can be exercised that is the essence of liberal democracy.

But Americans are in no mood to celebrate. Indeed, the second conclusion to be drawn from the US government shutdown is the virtual disappearance of American triumphalism. Chest-thumping exceptionalism has given way to a more sober patriotism, in which ordinary citizens recognize the long-term trends eroding the promise of equal opportunity, particularly the shortcomings that beset the country’s health-care, education, and infrastructure systems.

The anger of Tea Party Republicans (like the anger of Occupy Wall Street protesters) reflects a sense that nothing but dramatic, even revolutionary, measures can change the system. In response, however, more pragmatic voters are increasingly irate about political paralysis and their governing institutions’ inability to respond to the preferences of a clear majority of the population. In the midst of the shutdown, the Republican Party’s popular approval rating sank to barely a quarter of the national electorate, a historic low, while the approval rating for Congress as a whole stood at just 5%.

The final lesson of the shutdown is that political systems of every kind benefit from the addition of women. Many commented on the critical role played by six women senators – Republicans and Democrats – in reaching the compromises needed to end the crisis. These women have maintained relationships with one another across the partisan divide, while those among their male colleagues have steadily deteriorated, giving way to competitive grandstanding and vituperation.

Equally important, these women felt – and acted upon – the moral necessity of actually governing. In the words of Senator Susan Collins, a Republican from Maine who first put together the outlines of a deal and took it to the Senate floor, the shutdown “hurt all the small businesses” around Acadia National Park in her home state, “and that is plain wrong.”

The world should note. Women are not necessarily better than men at governing, but they often have different perspectives and habits of engagement that can be essential for cutting through the standoffs created by the need to defend male egos. They are also often more focused on the plight of actual people than on the promotion of grand principles, preferring concrete progress to abstract victory. From parliaments to peace negotiations, adding women improves outcomes.

The US government is back at work, for now. Negotiations for a real budget that all sides can live with are beginning. And assessments of how the shutdown will affect the Republican Party’s fortunes in the 2014 midterm elections are rife.

But the country’s social and economic divisions will ultimately find political solutions, through elections and the efforts of millions of Americans to achieve fundamental reforms. As frustrating and embarrassing as the last several weeks have been, it could have been much worse.