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The Trump Administration and the US Federal Government Workforce, One Year in

Abstract

Donald Trump's attacks on the federal bureaucracy in 2025 sorely tested the American system's civil and constitutional guard rails. Although he made significant advances on this front in the first year of his second term, he has some distance to go before achieving his goal of transforming the civil service into an instrument of his personal will.

Keywords federal workforce, career civil service, federal bureaucracy, Trump cuts, Trump downsizing

The beginning of 2026 witnessed hundreds of articles and podcasts recapping the second Trump administration's initial year in office, including many focused on his brazen efforts to purge and consolidate control of the federal bureaucracy. This article follows up and builds upon my analysis a year ago of Trump's early manoeuvres on federal employment policy (see Baehler, 2025).

In this analysis, I summarise the administration's main moves in 2025, the resistance they did and did not encounter, and the net impacts of their actions on the federal workforce and governing capacity. In contrast with *Washington Post* reporters who recently referred to 2025 as 'the year Trump broke the federal government' (Natanson and Kornfield, 2025), I stop short of declaring the system fully broken … yet.

Where did the Trump administration focus its anti-'deep-state' crusade in 2025?
Specific strategies for transforming the federal bureaucracy in Trump's image have been clear from the beginning thanks to the 900-page blueprint for his second term, *Mandate for Leadership*, often referred to as 'Project 2025'. The non-partisan American Civil Liberties Union refers to Project 2025 as 'a roadmap for how to replace the rule of law with right-wing ideals' (ACLU, 2025), including absolute presidential control of the entire federal workforce. The roadmap also has many features in common with what is known as 'unitary executive theory', in accordance with which the US president is viewed as having sole authority over all aspects of the executive branch of government.

Trump and his followers deem such control and authority necessary to avoid

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what they saw as bureaucratic obstruction during his first term by hordes of left-wing zealots in civil service positions who allegedly ran the federal government on behalf of Trump's political enemies. Fuelled by animus towards this imagined 'deep state' cabal, the second Trump administration took office determined to quickly 'bend or break the bureaucracy to the presidential will' (Project 2025, 2023, p.44).

My previous article identified the main tools for doing so: lay-offs, incentives to encourage voluntary exits, and

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reclassification of positions to exclude them from merit service protection. Trump advanced on all these fronts, and more, in 2025.

Lay-offs

Lay-offs enabled rapid downsizing of the federal workforce last year, although we may never know the exact number of workers affected. According to the US Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 322,000 workers exited the federal government in 2025 (starting after inauguration day) and 102,000 were hired, for a net loss of 219,000 – roughly 10% of the 2.3 million civilian federal workers on the job in 2024.

Of the 322,000 departures, OPM classifies 24,000 as involuntary, which includes 17,000 due to downsizing and 7,000 terminations of recent hires on probationary status (Korte, 2025). Other sources report a larger number (25,000) of probationary employees fired (Katz, 2025a).

Lay-offs also enabled the administration to damage, and in some cases eliminate, whole units and programmes the president doesn't like. On day one, Trump used executive order 14151 to terminate all diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility

(DEIA) programmes and initiatives. A follow-up memo the next day ordered agency heads to put those workers on paid leave immediately. As a result, every department lost positions in their civil rights, equal opportunity and related units. Some workers with no obvious connection to DEIA were also swept up, including those in areas such as employee engagement and Native American tribal relations, and people who had participated in diversity training or related programmes in the past (Meckler, Natanson and Mark, 2025).

Agencies seen as not fully embracing Trump's policy agenda experienced very deep workforce cuts in 2025. These are just a few of the many examples (Badger, Paris and Parlapiano, 2026):
- Federal Student Aid Office (–46%)
- Minority Business Development Agency (–51%)
- Council on Environmental Quality/ Office of Environmental Quality (–51%)
- Office of Lead Hazard Control and Healthy Homes (–52%)
- Agency for Health Care Research and Quality (–64%)
- National Endowment for the Humanities (–73%)
- US Agency for International Development (USAID) (–92%)
- Office of Pandemic Preparedness and Response Policy (–100%)

By contrast, departments favoured by Trump lost fewer than 10% of their employees:
- Department of Homeland Security (DHS) (–1%)
- Department of Veterans Affairs (–6%)
- NASA (–6%)
- Department of Defense (–8%).

A small number of agencies added positions. The Immigration and Customs

Enforcement (ICE) arm of DHS grew 29% as of November 2025, according to OPM data (ibid.). Other reports indicate a much larger ICE hiring surge of 120% between July 2025 and January 2026 (Katz, 2026).

Most lay-offs occurred in January, February and March 2025 during the brief tenure of Elon Musk, a celebrity billionaire and Trump's top campaign donor, at the helm of the highly publicised Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE). DOGE, which managed the downsizing process, favoured abrupt dismissals en masse, as practised widely in the corporate sector, including companies owned by Musk. Termination notices were effective immediately. Many federal workers discovered they had been let go when their building or email access was suddenly denied. As news of the first cuts quickly circulated, supervisors and workers across the federal government found themselves plunged into uncertainty.

Among the lay-offs planned for 2026 are 35,000 more employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs, which includes doctors and nurses. Veterans Affairs lost 30,000 positions in 2025, roughly 6% of its 2024 total of 475,000. Nearly 90% of the lost positions were in health care, including nurses, physicians, mental health providers and schedulers (Baker, 2026). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) plans several waves of cuts, the first of which began on New Year's Eve 2025. Based on leaked documents, FEMA's targeted cuts include a 41% reduction in CORE workers (Cadre of On-Call Response and Recovery), and an 85% reduction in standby workers (Sacks, 2026).

'Voluntary' separations

DOGE also utilised a modified buy-out technique for incentivising voluntary resignations. More than two million federal workers received the now-famous 'Fork in the Road' email from OPM on 28 January 2025. The email, which invited federal employees to resign effective 30 September and go on administrative leave with full pay and benefits for the intervening eight months was modelled on one used by Musk to slash Twitter's payroll (now X) after he acquired the company in 2022.

Estimates of how many workers accepted the offer, known as the deferred resignation programme (DRP), range between 150,000 and 200,000. Many reported doing so under duress due to 'heavy pressure campaigns' that accompanied the email, including implicit and explicit threats of future mass lay-offs or relocations for those who tried to hang on to their jobs (Katz, 2025b). Efforts to 'demean feds into taking the resignation offer'[1] included statements on OPM's website such as, 'The way to greater American prosperity is encouraging people to move from lower productivity jobs in the public sector to higher productivity jobs in the private sector' (Wagner, 2025a). Although the DRP offer went to all employees, the subsequent pressure campaigns appear to have targeted Trump's least favourite parts of the government (Bender, Silver-Greenberg and Flavelle, 2025).

Many federal employees reported feeling insulted and perplexed by the DRP offer, amidst questions about its legality and potentially 'false promises' (Bogardus and Bravender, 2025). Many felt caught between two awful choices: the grim prospect of staying and working under toxic leaders who might order new lay-offs or relocations at any point and the heartbreaking decision to permanently leave one's 'calling' and the 'transcendent national interest' one had planned to spend a career serving (Foer, 2026).

Distrust of the DRP grew with time as errors came to light. Some workers who accepted the offer were informed they were not eligible, then fired, and ultimately reinstated (Natanson et al., 2025). Others were told they were not eligible and then later accepted into the programme. In the meantime, some workers were left without health insurance coverage, unsure of their employment status and unable to apply for unemployment insurance. 'They are really in limbo,' said one union official (Bogardus et al., 2025).

Reclassification
In a classic illustration of the ephemeral nature of executive orders as policy tools, President Trump on day one of his second term revoked President Biden's earlier revocation of an executive order Trump signed at the end of his first term.

The current executive order (EO 14171) creates a new class of federal workers, known previously as Schedule F and now as Schedule Policy/Career (P/C), consisting of 'career positions in the Federal service of a confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character'. The executive order authorises a process for reclassifying existing positions from other schedules into Schedule P/C and then exempts positions in this class from 'competitive hiring rules' and 'adverse action procedures' to give agencies more

flexibility in managing their policy-facing career employees.

OPM expects roughly 50,000 current positions to be reclassified as Schedule P/C (around 2.5% of the civilian federal workforce), many fewer than the 200,000 jobs thought to be eligible in Trump's first term. Internal documents from agencies provide evidence of senior Trump officials applying 'sweeping' and 'maximalist' interpretations of what counts as a policy-related role – definitions that include large numbers of currently unionised workers not typically associated with policy work (Wagner, 2025b). Projections by watchdog groups indicate potential for reclassifying very large numbers of employees (Partnership for Public Service, 2025a).

No jobs have yet been reclassified as Schedule P/C. Assuming legal challenges are resolved (discussed later), the process is expected to begin in early 2026. OPM proposed regulations to implement the order in April 2025 and finalized them in February 2026.

Removing merit service protections makes members of Schedule P/C at-will

employees. At first glance, this might seem perfectly reasonable for employees in true policy-facing jobs. But upon closer inspection, this executive order represents a significant threat to the apolitical (i.e., non-partisan) culture of the entire civil service, for two reasons: first, because of very broad discretion around the definition of what counts as a policy-related role; and second, because it elides the current distinction between the fundamental obligations of career service employees and political appointees.

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Indeed, the language of the amended executive order essentially invites politics into federal personnel actions by enabling agency heads and White House officials to dismiss career civil servants for thinly veiled political reasons. Section 6(ii)b reads:

> Employees in or applicants for Schedule Policy/Career are … *required to faithfully implement administration policies* to the best of their ability, consistent with their constitutional oath and the vesting of executive authority solely in the President. Failure to do so is grounds for dismissal. (emphasis added)

Those familiar with the Constitution will recognise the contradiction in that sentence. Contrary to the executive order, the fundamental duties of career civil servants do not arise from any specific administration's policies, but rather from the laws/statutes and regulations that govern the agencies where those employees work. Their duties flow from the oath they

take to 'support and defend' and 'bear true faith and allegiance to' the US Constitution, including the Constitution's description of the executive branch in Article II, according to which the president 'shall take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed'.

Plucking the word 'faithfully' from its constitutional context and swapping 'administration policies' for 'the Laws' might fool some people into accepting Trump's redefinition of the career federal service, but it shouldn't. '[T]he Laws' which are to be 'faithfully executed' persist across presidential administrations until Congress changes them. A requirement to 'faithfully implement administration policies' rather than 'the Laws' on threat of dismissal makes civil servants deeply beholden to a

Trump's workforce policies never mention the importance of implementing laws and statutes. The absence is conspicuous and deliberate.

Regarding politicisation, the Schedule P/C executive order tries to offer reassurance that the administration values the apolitical nature of the career service:

Employees in or applicants for Schedule Policy/Career are not required to personally or politically support the current President or the policies of the current administration. (Section 6(ii)b)

But note the ambiguity. According to EO 14171, an employee can be dismissed for not 'faithfully' implementing an administration

significant, often specialised, expertise in the relevant laws and regulations.

A crucial lesson from 2025 is that federal employment policy (and all other policies) must function effectively under abnormal as well as normal circumstances. When 'presidential authority is wielded in bad faith' for the purpose of 'deliberately weakening agencies charged with implementing laws the president opposes', it is vital to resist the summary dismissal of career public servants who choose not to blindly follow bad-faith orders (Bednar, 2026). Workforce policies should recognise that a presidential administration's policies do not always align with, and cannot be substituted for, 'the Laws' or the Constitution.

Explicitly political removals

In his 4 March 2025 'State of the Union' address, Trump promised to 'reclaim power from this unaccountable bureaucracy … Any Federal bureaucrat who resists this change will be removed from office immediately, because we are draining the swamp.' Early in the year, federal employees in the Department of Justice found themselves being removed merely on the assumption that they would resist Trump's agenda.

The first to be removed were more than a dozen lawyers who worked with Special Counsel Jack Smith on two federal criminal cases against Trump during the Biden administration (Lynch and Goudsward, 2025a). Within days of those removals, dozens of prosecutors and FBI agents who handled cases related to the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol also were fired (Cheney and Gerstein, 2025; Lynch and Goudsward, 2025b). Recent reporting indicates continued efforts in 2026 to 'scour the FBI's vast holdings to root out negative information about those who once investigated President Trump' (Thrush and Feuer, 2026).

In a different type of high-profile case, Department of Justice lawyer Erez Reuveni was placed on administrative leave and then fired for admitting to a judge that he was frustrated by a lack of access to vital information about the case at hand (Hsu, 2025). US Attorney General Pam Bondi, who heads the department, interpreted Reuveni's answers to the judge's questions as examples

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single president. This is intentional, of course. Trump wants all federal workers to owe their duty to him directly rather than to the Constitution or the statutes authorising their agencies. The president being an elected official, the executive order unavoidably introduces politics into a large group of career positions. Put simply, the order creates a direct confrontation between Schedule P/C workers' new job descriptions and their constitutional and statutory obligations.

This wording trick appears to be a favourite of the current administration. A different day-one decree, EO 14170, prevents the hiring of individuals who are unwilling 'to faithfully serve the Executive Branch' – yet another misleading characterisation of who or what civil servants are meant to be faithfully serving. The three branches of government were created to serve the people, not the other way round. It is interesting to note that

policy, which means employees are required to *professionally* support the current president and the current administration's policies. Is professional support effectively different from personal or political support, and if so, how? The answer is not obvious, and the text of the executive order does not clarify.

In practical terms, most presidents in the past have attempted to issue policies and orders consistent with existing laws, while also recommending (indeed, urging) Congress to consider new laws or amendments that they 'judge necessary and expedient', per the Constitution's clear description of the job (Article II). In practice, career employees often help new occupants of the White House and their staff understand how the administration can and cannot use current law to accomplish their goals. Under normal circumstances, this is a vital service provided by federal employees with

of insufficiently 'zealous advocacy' for the government's position. She cited those grounds as justification for his firing.

In June 2022 a dozen highly experienced FBI special agents successfully de-escalated a potentially violent crowd-control situation on the streets of Washington, DC by adopting a kneeling position to signal non-aggression. Although a 2020 internal review of the agents' actions found them consistent with FBI policy and a 2024 inspector general's report did not cite any misconduct, photos of the incident went viral on social media and led to right-wing accusations that the agents were kneeling to demonstrate inappropriate partisan support for the protestors' cause. (The crowd was protesting against racial injustice.) The agents have steadfastly maintained that their actions were motivated solely by the urgent need to interrupt rising hostilities.

Almost immediately upon taking office – fully five years after the incident – Trump's new FBI director, Kash Patel, removed some of those agents from their supervisory roles and launched a new investigation. The FBI then fired all 12 agents in September 2025, before the latest investigation had concluded, on grounds of 'unprofessional conduct and a lack of impartiality in carrying out duties, leading to the potential weaponization of government' (Johnson, 2025). The 2025 agency review found no misconduct by the agents, thus laying bare the political nature of the firings.

'Weaponisation of government' is Trump's all-purpose epithet for the many abuses he accuses the Obama and Biden administrations of committing with help from the career public service. Curiously, 'weaponisation' to the MAGA mind appears to be a one-way street. According to MAGA rules, it applies only to actions taken by Trump's political enemies against Trump and his inner circle. When the Trump administration pursues explicit political payback within the civil service, especially the Department of Justice, they claim to be 'de-weaponising' the government.

Attacks on collective bargaining

Roughly one quarter of all federal civilian employees belong to one of 100-plus different unions representing federal employees in various sectors across the government. Major government-wide unions include the National Treasury Employees Union, the American Federation of Government Employees and the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees.

Trump's executive orders 13251 and 14343 stripped the right to collective bargaining from roughly one million workers in about 40 agencies in March and August 2025. This led to a cascade of agency actions to cancel union contracts, including at the Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Veterans Affairs, Federal Bureau of Prisons and Transportation Safety Administration, in the last five months of the year (Economic Policy Institute, 2025).

What resistance did the administration encounter in 2025?

My previous article discussed the potential for constitutional and civil society guard rails to prevent Trump from breaking the federal government. Civil society organisations demonstrated extraordinary energy and creativity throughout 2025 and show no signs of slowing down in 2026. Regarding the constitutional principle of checks and balances, the other branches of government have provided minimal protection.

But before examining institutional guard rails, it is worth noting evidence of common sense being exercised in a few situations and the role of independent watchdog agencies within government.

Common-sense rehiring

As of November 2025, Brookings Institution scholars had collected news reports of more than 25,000 DOGE-induced firings followed by messy efforts to rehire the same workers (Kamarck, 2025). Examples include the Department

of Education's Office of Civil Rights, which spent $40 million paying employees to stay home on administrative leave in 2025 and then decided in December to recall 200 of those employees to handle a rapidly growing backlog of civil rights complaints (Miranda, 2025). How long the reinstated jobs will last is anyone's guess.

At the Government Services Agency, a major target of DOGE, nearly 80% of headquarters staff, 65% of portfolio managers and 35% of facilities managers were cut via various means before it became clear that the agency was floundering in 'triage mode' and basic services were not being delivered (Goodman and Foley, 2025). The agency ended up rehiring around 285 of the 600–

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700 laid-off members of its Public Buildings Service division in September and October (Fowler, Bond and McLaughlin, 2025). They also rescinded more than half of the 800 lease cancellation notices sent to landlords of government buildings in March in an ill-fated DOGE scheme that aimed to reduce wasteful spending on under-used office space but ultimately cost money due to chaos and fines paid to landlords (Foley, Goodman and Keller, 2025).

The non-partisan oversight office of Congress, known as the Government Accountability Office, is now studying the DOGE-led changes to the Public Buildings Service division and the need for systematic reorganisation of that division, with reports due for publication in 2026 (US Government Accountability Office, 2025).

Watchdogs

The Government Accountability Office had a very busy year in 2025. In response to requests from members of Congress,

by April the agency had opened 39 investigations of presidential efforts to defer or cancel congressionally appropriated spending, and three audits of how DOGE had used data in the Department of Treasury, Social Security Administration and OPM (Brackman, 2025; Heckman, 2025). In July, three Democratic senators introduced legislation entitled the Pick Up After Your DOGE Act (Senate Bill 2533), authorising the Government Accountability Office to examine DOGE's access to sensitive government IT systems across the federal government.

The Government Accountability Office's ability to continue this work depends on the result of congressional budget negotiations in January 2026. The

Despite Trump's best efforts to suppress them, inspectors general continued to function. At the Department of Treasury, for example, the inspector general reported that nearly all the 7,300 probationary employees fired from the IRS in February 2025 on grounds of unsatisfactory performance were dismissed improperly. The inspector general found that more than half the fired workers had not yet been performance-rated, and 99% of those who had been rated received scores of 'fully successful or better'. After placing the terminated employees on administrative leave in March pending legal challenges, the IRS in May informed them that they could return to work. In response, 3,000 returned.

The first incident involved apparently 'accidental' terminations of employees at the Department of Agriculture unit that was managing the H5N1 avian flu outbreak – a severe illness that had been decimating poultry flocks and driving up the price of eggs, a major talking point for the president. The department quickly moved to 'rectify the situation and rescind those letters' after the situation came to light (Smith, Zanona and Strickler, 2025).

In a second incident, termination notices were sent to about 300 probationary employees in the Department of Energy's National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA), which oversees the country's nuclear arsenal. Those lay-offs were rescinded 24 hours later, after members of Congress raised concerns about the threats posed by understaffing this critical function (CBS News, 2025). Some of the reinstatement letters were delayed, however, because the employees' work emails were turned off and NNSA did not have alternative contact information (Kim, 2025).

Members of Congress have also exercised their power of the purse with a somewhat surprising level of bipartisan agreement recently.[2] As the House of Representatives completed negotiations on multiple bipartisan spending bills in advance of the 30 January 2026 deadline for avoiding another government shutdown, it became clear that lawmakers were 'quietly rejecting almost all of the deepest cuts to federal programs that President Trump requested for this year' (Edmondson, 2026).

The funding bill for foreign aid, for example, contains $50 billion, which is $19 billion more than Trump requested. The bill would cut 16% from the previous year, compared with Trump's proposed 50% cut. Some bills contain continued funding for programmes Trump wanted to shutter, such as Voice of America, the National Endowment for Democracy and the National Endowment for the Arts, while also rebuffing Trump's request to zero out contributions to the United Nations and other international organisations (Katz, 2026). Other bills cut the IRS's tax enforcement unit by 7% rather than Trump's requested 34% and maintain steady funding levels for the National

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Republican majority in the House of Representatives is seeking deep funding cuts and restrictions on the office's authority to investigate Trump's cuts, but the Senate has favoured level funding.

My previous article mentioned Trump's firing of 17 inspectors general early in 2025. These are the department-level internal watchdogs who ask hard questions about waste, fraud and abuse within agencies. Non-partisan accountability experts recommend adding, rather than subtracting, investigative and enforcement capacity if the goal is to improve detection of waste, fraud and abuse, punish it more swiftly and deter it more effectively (Steuerle, 2025). Despite his bellicose rhetoric about cracking down on waste, fraud and abuse in the federal government, Trump left many inspector general positions unfilled for months and withheld funding for offices that support these functions.

Congress

Where institutional guard rails are concerned, one might expect the legislative branch to pose the most significant obstacle to Trump's gutting of the federal workforce, because the president is essentially cancelling spending that Congress duly authorised and appropriated. Yet throughout 2025 most Republicans in Congress continued to put their loyalty to the Republican president above their obligation to protect Congress's powers.

A few exceptions to this pattern deserve attention. Within weeks of the inauguration, Republican members of Congress began privately warning the Trump administration of their concerns about DOGE's more reckless cuts. After two especially egregious incidents, some Republican lawmakers even called on DOGE publicly to slow down and consider consequences before wielding the metaphoric chainsaw.

Science Foundation and NASA's science units despite requests for deep cuts.

Congressional Democrats continue to protest about nearly everything Trump does, of course, but the administration will not experience pressure intense enough to influence its approach until large numbers of Republicans break from the president. Although no one expects such a break, much will depend on the public mood in the run-up to the mid-term elections, when all 435 seats in the US House of Representatives and one third of the Senate's 100 seats are due to be contested. If the president's popularity continues to decline, Republicans running for re-election may need to start distancing themselves from Trump and looking for new policy messages.

States

It is poorly understood that 80–85% of federal workers work outside Washington, DC. As the scale of Trump's downsizing plans came to light, many states quickly established programmes to help federal workers residing in their states find new jobs following lay-offs, deferred resignations and ordinary resignations. Recognising the large volume of expertise exiting federal agencies as a valuable asset, some state government agencies actively recruited former federal staff to join them. In addition, state attorneys general filed hundreds of lawsuits challenging the many 2025 presidential orders and executive actions that posed harms to states.

Civil society organisations

Tracking pro-democracy, pro-rule-of-law and pro-civil service activity in the US's highly dispersed and decentralised non-profit and advocacy sectors poses a significant challenge. The most visible projects in 2025 consisted of organised public demonstrations in cities across the US and lawsuits filed by interest groups, often in collaboration with federal workers' unions and/or state attorneys general. Some of the organisations leading these activities sprang up after the 2024 election for the purpose of safeguarding institutions considered under threat. Others began during Trump's first term in office. Others are older organisations that have chosen to focus on responding to

Trump's legal and constitutional excesses through civic action, education and civil litigation.

Key groups include: the Washington Litigation Group, Democracy Forward, the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund, Protect Democracy, Common Cause, No Kings, the American Civil Liberties Union, the American Friends Service Committee, Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington (CREW), the Coalition for Democracy, Democracy Defenders Fund, Public Citizen, the Urban Justice Center, Judicial Watch, Lambda Legal, Indivisible, Human Rights Campaign, League of Women Voters, the Robert and Ethel Kennedy Human Rights Center (somewhat ironically), and many, many others.

In October 2025, a coalition of more than 3,700 non-profit organisations signed a joint statement (Democracy Defenders Fund, 2025) condemning the Trump administration's efforts to characterise progressive causes as part of a proto-terrorist network of extremists that 'embraces and elevates violence to achieve policy outcomes', in Trump's words (White House, 2025). The coalition is part of an effort to create a sort of 'NATO for nonprofits' that would view an attack on one non-profit member as an attack on all (Nicholas, 2025).

New pro-MAGA and pro-Trump groups have also been forming, and many previous groups continued to grow and amass influence in 2025, such as Turning Point USA, the late Charlie Kirk's organisation, and the America First Policy Institute, which formed in 2021 to prepare an agenda for a possible second Trump term. One key organisation, the Heritage Foundation (lead architect of the Project 2025 report), has struggled with internal

disagreements. A dozen staff left in December to join former vice president Mike Pence's organisation, Advancing American Freedom, which offers a non-MAGA conservative alternative.

The sheer size and scale of anti-Trump protests captured attention in 2025, with an estimated 5 million participating in 'No Kings' demonstrations across the country in June and 7 million on 18 October. Although these numbers represent historically large turn-outs for public demonstrations in the US, even the largest attracted only 2% of the total population.

Government worker unions

The Trump administration's contemptuous treatment of federal workers spurred

> The lawsuits began almost immediately following Trump's initial surge of executive orders and continued to roll out throughout 2025.

union membership in 2025. One example is the American Federation of Government Employees which added 13,000 new dues-paying members in January and another 4,300 in the first five days of February – a total 6% increase (Bender, Silver-Greenberg and Flavelle, 2025).

Unions even received a somewhat surprising boost from the US House of Representatives, which passed bipartisan legislation on 11 December – the Protecting America's Workforce Act – designed to nullify Trump's March and August anti-collective bargaining executive orders. The orders remain in place, however, because the bill has yet to be considered in the Senate.

Perhaps most importantly, government unions have played key roles as plaintiffs in many of the lawsuits brought against the Trump administration's workforce policies.

The courts

The lawsuits began almost immediately following Trump's initial surge of executive

Table 1: Status of legal challenges against the Trump administration since 20 January 2025

Status	Workforce cases	FOIA & records cases
Government 'wins'		
TEMPORARY BLOCK of government action DENIED	24.5	3.5
Government action NOT BLOCKED, pending appeal	15	0
Case closed / dismissed in favour of GOVERNMENT	12	0
Sub-total	51.5	3.5
Plaintiff 'wins'		
Government action TEMPORARILY BLOCKED	32.5	0.5
Government action BLOCKED	4	3
Government action BLOCKED, pending appeal	6	1
Case closed / dismissed in favour of PLAINTIFF(S)	4	1
Sub-total	46.5	5.5
Other		
Awaiting court ruling	55	63
Case closed	12	0
TOTAL	165	72

Source: calculated based on *Just Security's* Trump Administration Litigation Tracker

orders and continued to roll out throughout 2025. *Just Security*, a digital law and policy journal housed at New York University's School of Law, has been tracking legal challenges to the Trump administration's executive actions since 29 January 2025. Out of the tracker's current database of 587 cases, 165 challenge either Trump's federal workforce actions – such as political firings, large-scale reductions in force, rescission of collective bargaining, restrictions on government employees' freedom of speech, restrictions on eligibility for public service loan forgiveness, disclosure of civil service records, appointment of acting US attorneys, the DRP and Schedule P/C – or policies with significant implications for the workforce, including dismantling of programmes and agencies, relocation of agencies, and the DEIA ban.

The second column of Table 1 lists the status of those 165 cases as of mid-January 2026. Another 73 cases are specifically challenging the Trump administration's refusal to respond to official requests for information about DOGE's activities and other administration actions under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and/or the administration's records retention practices. The status of those cases is recorded in column 3 of Table 1.

Table 1 shows that most cases are still working their way through the system. Of those that have been resolved, the record

is mixed, and most successes for plaintiffs involve only temporary blocks of the administration's actions.

Three workforce-related cases were appealed all the way to the conservative-leaning Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS), where they were all decided in Trump's favour with brief, unsigned orders. On 8 April 2025, SCOTUS blocked a federal judge's order to rehire terminated probationary employees while legal challenges were proceeding. On 8 July, SCOTUS lifted a federal judge's order blocking large-scale federal reductions in force while legal challenges were proceeding. On 14 July, SCOTUS lifted a federal judge's order to reinstate 1,400 workers to the Department of Education. Although these decisions cleared a path for the administration to dismantle the Department of Education and pursue mass lay-offs in multiple agencies, as threatened, other legal challenges to the government's actions were still pending in multiple courts and new challenges were being filed. The legal uncertainty caused some departments to put employees on paid leave rather than dismissing them immediately.

One thing we have learned from this body of cases is that the courts are unlikely to play a definitive role in protecting bureaucratic capacity in the remainder of Trump's term for the simple reason that

existing statutes grant presidents very broad powers to structure the federal civil service as they see fit. As one administrative law expert put it, presidents have 'far more legal authority over the federal workforce than most scholars, journalists, and even many public servants realize' (Bednar, 2026). Even the most enlightened judges cannot change that reality. Courts could, however, choose to exercise less deference towards an administration that is clearly on a destructive rampage.

What can we say about the net impact of the 2025 assault on the federal bureaucracy?
The federal bureaucracy always needs reviewing to maintain efficiency. President Clinton led the last concerted effort to do so 30 years ago. His National Performance Review conducted careful, systematic reviews of functions and worked with Congress to enact streamlining reforms into law. Ultimately, although Congress did not approve all of Clinton's cuts, the number of federal workers decreased by 4% over eight years. Since then, as new pockets of inefficiency have undoubtedly formed, good-faith proposals for smart, targeted trimming could earn bipartisan support and yield both budget savings and improved effectiveness.

By contrast, Trump and Musk's politically targeted pillaging spree has been unprecedented in scale, incompetence and brutality, which also makes its long-term effects very difficult to project. Although the full impact on US governmental capacity will take years to fully manifest, early consequences have begun to appear.

The costs of chaos
First and foremost are the immediate costs of firing and rehiring workers, putting large numbers of workers on extended paid leave, damaging workforce productivity by ramping up uncertainty, and forfeiting tax revenue by firing IRS employees who enforce tax collection. Various sources have estimated these costs at $135 billion (Williamson, 2025). Less obvious costs, such as fines paid for letting government office leases expire without vacating the buildings, will be identified as time goes by (PBS, 2025).

Litany of visible harms

Documented short-term impacts of the Trump shake-up include: reduced and slower health services for veterans; delayed improvements to the nation's organ transplantation system; fewer launches of weather balloons; lack of classroom access for disabled students; and cuts in various services at national parks, including fewer open hours at visitor centres, beach closures, reduced tours, and inability to reserve campsites in national parks during peak summer months (Ellis, 2025). The federal government's 13 statistical agencies lost 20–30% of their staff over the year, leading to what the American Statistical Association has called a 'severe decline' in their 'ability to meet their basic mission' (Alms, 2025).

At the community level, documented effects include cutbacks and cancellation of after-school and literacy programmes, local mental health services, and school repair and construction projects; lay-offs of university faculty; reduced scholarships for students; threats to the continuation of food banks; and interruptions to school lunch and other meal programmes for underserved groups, which in turn reduces income to farmers who supply those programmes (Partnership for Public Service, 2025c). Drainage and flood control projects have been cancelled, as have improvements to broadcasting infrastructure that enables emergency alerts. Fewer clinical trials of new medicines means less access to treatment for patients.

Long-term capacity

Long-term impacts of a less experienced federal workforce are difficult to predict but potentially worrying. Many federal employees who took the DRP buy-out or resigned outright had specialised skills and experience that are in demand in the private sector; they will be difficult to replace. Take food safety inspectors, for example. Although the administration did not target food inspectors for termination, 63% of those who voluntarily left the Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service were inspectors (Henderson, 2025). ProPublica also recently reported a sharp decline in the number of inspections of foreign food production facilities, which are major sources of food-borne illnesses (Waldman

and Roberts, 2025). The decline in foreign inspections followed a 65% cut in Food and Drug Administration (FDA) staff who helped coordinate travel and budgets for those inspectors. (Administrative staff do not always represent 'bloat'.) Hiring enough inspectors has long been a struggle. In December, the FDA told consumer groups that current staffing was adequate, despite 470 out of 589 retained positions being unfilled, with 5 of 10 unfilled in the infant formula safety team (Todd, 2025).

Multiple agencies now face significant vacancies after DOGE cut positions, the government realised they needed many of those people back, and only some returned (Natanson et al., 2025). As of December 2025, some local National Weather Service offices were reporting 38–42% vacancy rates for meteorologists, scientists and other technical experts whose work is critical to providing communities with timely, accurate warnings of potentially deadly weather events (Mellen and Natanson, 2025). At the National Nuclear Security Administration, even after the employee call-backs mentioned earlier, the combination of buy-outs and firings caused significant losses of critical expertise in this 'chronically understaffed but critically important agency', including experts in highly sensitive fields such as the secure transport of nuclear materials, the construction of reactors for nuclear submarines, and safety standards for nuclear warhead assembly (LaFraniere, Kim and Tate, 2025).

Looking ahead, deteriorating employment conditions raise concerns about the government's future ability to hire and retain needed workers. At the Department of Justice, for example,

thousands of lawyers have opted to resign, with and without buy-outs, rather than adapt to the department's new norms and expectations. This includes the high-profile case of six prosecutors who quit when they were (1) asked to open a federal criminal investigation of the widow of a protestor who was shot and killed by ICE agents in Minnesota, and (2) informed that the actions of the ICE agent would not be investigated for possible violations of federal law (Londoño, 2026).

According to the American Bar Association, applications to fill empty Department of Justice positions have 'plummeted' in recent months, leaving the department seriously understaffed and struggling to fill vacancies (American Bar

> ... Trump made considerable progress towards eroding the professional, non-partisan federal civil service and transforming it into something resembling a president's personal staff.

Association, 2025). This marks a sharp change from the past when large numbers of top law school graduates competed for coveted positions at the department.

Trauma, anyone?

From the perspective of Office of Management and Budget director Russell Vought and probably many others in Trump's orbit, every aspect of the bureaucratic purge, including the errors, can be viewed as a tremendous policy success. In a 2023 speech at the Center for Renewing America, Vought famously said, 'We want the bureaucrats to be traumatically affected. When they wake up in the morning, we want them to not want to go to work because they are increasingly viewed as the villains. We want to put them in trauma.' He reaffirmed this goal in a 2024 interview with Tucker Carlson on 18 November: 'Yes, I called for trauma within the bureaucracies.' And the evidence suggests he got it.

Public opinion

The public is feeling the effects. Comparison of poll numbers in March and September 2025 shows a significant increase in people answering 'Yes' to the question, 'Do you know anyone personally who has been impacted by the Trump administration's cuts to the federal government?', from 29% to 46%. Roughly 60% of younger adults, aged 18–34, answered 'Yes' compared with 33% of respondents 65 and over in September. Most of the effects cited were negative, including people losing jobs or access to benefits, while some respondents cited positive effects such as reducing waste and lowering prices. Close to half (46%) of respondents said the cuts had made their lives worse; 33% said the cuts made their lives better (Partnership for Public Service, 2025b).

A Washington Post–ABC News–IPSOS poll in October found that 63% of respondents 'disapprove' of 'the way Donald Trump is managing the federal government' and 57% thought he is 'going too far' in 'laying off government employees to cut the size of the federal workforce' (Clement, Balz and Ba Tran, 2025).

Conclusion

Although presidents have exercised considerable legal authority over the federal civil service, for better and worse, over the past 100-plus years, 'bipartisan respect for the merit system' and the principles of professionalism have largely restrained them from abusing the system (Bednar, 2026). Until the Trump era.

In the first year of his second term, Trump made considerable progress towards eroding the professional, non-partisan federal civil service and transforming it into something resembling a president's personal staff. He appears to have advanced further on that battlefield in 2025 than in all four years of his first term. At the same time, his slash-and-burn, shock-and-awe methods have invited serious rebukes from some of his loyalists, undermined the performance of core governmental functions, rattled the public, and forced some reversals. What happens next depends on the stamina of state officials, federal workers unions and civil society institutions, as well as the professionalism of judges and the results of the 2026 mid-term elections.

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1 'Feds' is a common nickname for federal workers. It is not pejorative.

2 One notable exception is Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) funding, where members of Congress sharply disagree.

Acknowledgement

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