

## SPA Policy Brief

# Safeguarding the US Federal Government Workforce: Lessons from the 2025 Assault on the Bureaucracy

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2025, the second Trump administration implemented aggressive strategies to assert presidential control over the entire U.S. federal workforce, including the professional, non-partisan federal civil service. Guided by the Project 2025 blueprint and “unitary executive theory,” these strategies included large-scale lay-offs, coercive “voluntary” separations, the politicized reclassification of positions, explicit political removals, and significant attacks on collective bargaining rights. As a result, the [federal civilian workforce shrank](#) by approximately 10% in 2025, with immediate impacts on operational capacity, particularly in agencies disfavored by the administration.

While various “guard rails”—including Congress, state attorneys general, civil society organizations, and unions—demonstrated resistance, their effectiveness was often limited. Judicial interventions frequently resulted in only temporary blocks, and the Supreme Court often ruled in the administration’s favor. [Analysis conducted by SPA Scholar in Residence Karen Baehler](#) suggests that while the federal government is not yet “fully broken,” the 2025 actions significantly advanced the administration’s goal of transforming the civil service into an instrument of presidential will.

### INTRODUCTION

The bedrock of effective U.S. democratic governance is a professional, apolitical federal civil service committed to implementing laws and serving the public good regardless of the political party in power. This principle was severely challenged in 2025. The second Trump administration, fueled by animus toward an imagined “deep state” and armed with a clear roadmap, embarked on a mission to “bend or break the bureaucracy to the presidential will.” This brief synthesizes Baehler’s analysis of the offensive, the varying efficacy of institutional and societal responses, and the initial, net impact on the nation’s governing capacity.



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### THE PROBLEM: A SYSTEMATIC EROSION OF THE FEDERAL WORKFORCE

The Trump administration’s actions in 2025 constituted a coordinated campaign to exert unprecedented control over the federal workforce through several interconnected strategies:

#### 1. Mass Lay-offs and Targeted Downsizing

According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), 322,000 workers exited the federal government in 2025, with 102,000 hired, resulting in a net loss of 219,000—approximately 10% of the 2.3 million civilian federal workers. Of these departures, 24,000 were involuntary, including 17,000 due to downsizing and 7,000 probationary terminations.

On day one, Executive Order 14151 terminated all Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility (DEIA) programs and initiatives. [Agencies perceived as hostile to Trump’s policy agenda faced particularly deep cuts.](#) Examples include the Federal Student Aid Office (-46%), the Minority Business Development Agency (-51%), the Council on Environmental Quality (-51%), and USAID (-92%). Those favored by Trump, such as the Department of Homeland Security (-1%) and the Department of Veterans Affairs (-6%), experienced minimal losses, while Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reportedly grew by 120% as of January 2026.

Most lay-offs occurred early in the year, managed by the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) under Elon Musk. DOGE favored abrupt, mass dismissals, often

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leaving federal workers to discover their termination when building or email access was denied. [Further significant cuts are planned for 2026](#), including 35,000 more employees at the Department of Veterans Affairs (predominantly healthcare workers) and substantial reductions at FEMA.

### 2. Coercive “Voluntary” Separations

DOGE used a modified buy-out technique to incentivize resignations. An email sent to over two million federal workers invited them to resign by September 30th. Estimates suggest between 150,000 and 200,000 workers accepted this “[deferred resignation program](#)” (DRP), many under “heavy pressure campaigns” and implicit threats of future mass layoffs. [OPM’s website](#) even stated, “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,” underscoring a deliberate attempt to devalue public service. The DRP was plagued by errors and left some employees without health insurance or clarity on their employment status.

### 3. Politicized Reclassification of Positions

Executive Order 14171 created a new class of federal workers: Schedule Policy/Career (P/C). These positions, identified on the basis of their “confidential, policy-determining, policy-making, or policy-advocating character,” are now exempt from competitive hiring rules and adverse action procedures, making their occupants essentially “at will” employees. OPM initially expected around 50,000 positions (2.5% of the federal workforce) to be reclassified, though [watchdog groups expected many more](#).

The EO’s Section 6(ii)b states: “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.” This redefinition politicizes career positions by enabling politicized dismissals, which directly contradicts the constitutional duties of civil servants, who swear allegiance to “the Laws” and the Constitution, not “administration policies.”

### 4. Explicit Political Removals

In its first year, the administration also engaged in explicit po-

litical purges. Dozens of Justice Department lawyers who worked on federal criminal cases against Trump during the Biden administration were removed, as were prosecutors and FBI agents involved in January 6 investigations. [FBI Director Kash Patel removed and then fired 12 special agents](#) in September 2025, despite previous internal reviews finding no misconduct, on grounds of “unprofessional conduct and a lack of impartiality...leading to the potential weaponization of government.”

### 5. Attacks on Collective Bargaining

Executive Orders 13251 and 14343 stripped collective bargaining rights from approximately one million federal workers. This led to the cancellation of union contracts across numerous agencies, including the EPA, Department of Veterans Affairs, and TSA, significantly undermining federal employee protections.

## RESISTANCE AND “GUARD RAILS”

### 1. Common-sense Rehiring

The operational failures caused by aggressive cuts sometimes forced agencies to reverse course. The Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights recalled 200 employees due to a rapidly growing backlog. The Government Services Agency, after experiencing service breakdowns, rehired around 285 of 600-700 laid-off workers.

### 2. Independent Watchdogs

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) had a busy year, opening 39 investigations into presidential efforts to defer or cancel congressionally appropriated spending, and auditing DOGE’s data use. Inspectors General (IGs), despite Trump’s efforts to suppress them, continued to function. To take one example, the Treasury IG reported improper dismissals of 7,300 probationary IRS employees.

### 3. Congress

While many Republicans maintained loyalty to the president, bipartisan concerns emerged after particularly problematic incidents, such as the [“accidental” terminations of USDA employees managing an H5N1 avian flu outbreak and NNSA workers overseeing the nuclear arsenal](#). Congress quietly rejected most of Trump’s deep budget

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cuts, and the “Protecting America’s Workforce Act,” which aimed to nullify anti-collective bargaining orders, won bi-partisan support in the House before stalling in the Senate.

#### 4. States, Civil Society, and Unions

States established programs to help laid-off federal workers and filed hundreds of lawsuits challenging harmful presidential orders. Civil society organizations (e.g., ACLU, Democracy Forward) organized public demonstrations and legal challenges. Government worker unions gained membership, brought lawsuits, and got bipartisan support for legislation to protect collective bargaining.

#### 5. The Courts

Lawsuits challenging the administration’s actions began almost immediately, with Just Security tracking 165 cases related to workforce policies. While some temporary blocks were issued, the Supreme Court often ruled in Trump’s favor, blocking lower court orders to rehire terminated employees or halt large-scale reductions in force. This demonstrated the significant legal authority presidents have over the federal workforce and the limitations of judicial intervention, especially given existing statutes.

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

Status	Workforce cases	FOIA & records cases
<b>Government ‘wins’</b>		
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
<b>Plaintiff ‘wins’</b>		
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
<b>Other</b>		
Awaiting court ruling	55	63
Case closed	12	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>72</b>

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

## IMPACTS AND CONSEQUENCES

The systematic assault had immediate, visible, and potentially long-lasting effects:

#### 1. The Costs of Chaos

The rapid firings and rehiring, extended paid leaves, and increased uncertainty damaged workforce productivity and incurred substantial financial costs, estimated at \$135 billion. Fines paid for expired government office leases added to these costs.

#### 2. Visible Harms to Public Services

The documented short-term impacts included reduced health services for veterans, delayed improvements to the organ transplantation system, cuts in national park services, and a severe decline in the capacity of federal statistical agencies. At the community level, cuts affected after-school and literacy programs, mental health services, school repair projects, food banks, and meal programs for underserved groups, directly impacting citizens.

#### 3. Long-term Capacity Erosion

Many federal employees who left possessed expertise difficult to replace, such as food safety inspectors at home and abroad, and critical experts in nuclear security. Significant vacancy rates, such as 38-42% for meteorologists in some National Weather Service offices, directly jeopardize public safety. The Department of Justice experienced a steep drop in applications for attorney positions, leading to a serious understaffing problem. The intentional trauma inflicted on the bureaucracy undermines the government’s future ability to attract and retain skilled workers.

#### 4. Public Opinion

Polls showed a significant increase in people knowing someone personally impacted by these cuts, from 29% to 46% between March and September 2025. Nearly half (46%) of respondents said the cuts made their lives worse. A Washington Post-ABC News-IPSOS poll found 63% disapproved of Trump’s management of the federal government.

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### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Multiple policy tools are available to counter the erosion of the federal civil service and prevent future abuses. The following is just a sample:

#### **Strengthen Statutory Protections for Career**

**Employees:** Congress should enact legislation that explicitly codifies civil service protections, limiting the executive branch's ability to arbitrarily reclassify positions (e.g., Schedule P/C) or remove large numbers of career employees without due process. Enshrining these protections in statute will make them more resilient to executive orders.

#### **Reinforce Congressional Oversight and**

**Appropriations:** Congress must vigorously exercise its constitutional powers to oversee the executive branch and control appropriations. This includes legislating against the deferral or cancellation of congressionally appropriated funds and ensuring independent bodies like the GAO and IGs receive adequate funding and maintain access to relevant data and information for their investigations.

#### **Protect and Empower Independent Watchdogs:**

Legislative measures are needed to strengthen the independence and tenure of Inspectors General, ensuring they can fulfill their mandate without political interference. This includes safeguarding their budgets and staff, and mandating transparent reporting and follow-up on their findings.

**Uphold Collective Bargaining Rights:** Congress should unequivocally protect the collective bargaining rights of all federal employees through legislation that shields these rights from unilateral executive action.

#### **Reaffirm the Apolitical Role of the Civil Service:**

Educational campaigns are needed to reinforce the constitutional and statutory obligations of career civil servants, with a focus on their duty to "the Laws" and the Constitution over specific administration policies. Such programs should seek to foster a workplace culture that values expertise, public service, and diversity, thereby attracting and retaining top talent.

#### **Support Judicial Review of Executive Actions:**

While acknowledging legal limits, courts must scrutinize executive actions that seek to undermine merit system principles, maliciously harm governmental capacity, infringe on congressional powers, or normalize the targeting of bureaucrats for political retribution.

### CONCLUSION

The events of 2025 represent a significant and deeply concerning shift in federal personnel policy. The current administration's deliberate and systematic efforts to undermine the non-partisan, professional character of the U.S. federal civil service inflicted considerable damage on governmental capacity, public service delivery, and employee morale. While various checks and balances offered some resistance, their limitations highlight the urgent need for more robust, statutory safeguards. The imperative is clear: to learn from these challenges and proactively reinforce the institutional, legal, and cultural foundations that uphold the integrity and expertise of the federal bureaucracy. A strong, independent, and professional civil service is not merely a bureaucratic ideal but a fundamental component of resilient democratic governance.