

DEMOCRACY
FORWARD 

Demanding Accountability

**Democracy Forward's
Investigations in the
First Year of the Trump-
Vance Administration**



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**Sunlight is said
to be the best of
disinfectants.**



LOUIS D. BRANDEIS
WHAT PUBLICITY CAN DO



The Threat & How Democracy Forward is Meeting the Moment

The Trump-Vance administration in its first year waged an unprecedented assault on the federal government and programs that serve millions of Americans.

The administration deployed wide-ranging methods to undermine federal agencies, programs, and workers, ranging from the “[chainsaw](#)” of the so-called “[Department of Government Efficiency](#)” (DOGE) stood up by President Trump’s billionaire ally Elon Musk, to the [widespread and illegal firings of tens of thousands of civil servants](#), and the departures of [hundreds of thousands more](#), to the unlawful [decimation](#) of [billions](#) of [dollars](#) in federal funding, to the [weakening of regulations](#) and [enforcement mechanisms](#), to the flagrant abuses of power and egregious conflicts of interest at the senior-most levels of our government.

The administration has [claimed](#) that Trump is the “most transparent and accessible President in American history,” and yet its actions across the government show us how access to public records is being increasingly limited. The loss of expertise in the federal workforce, slower response times providing answers to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, the [dismantling](#) of FOIA offices, the [firing](#) of [FOIA](#) staff, and [cuts](#) to FOIA programs – paired with officials not complying with required records preservation laws and increased fear of retaliation and interference – highlight that this administration is, in fact, hampering transparency efforts and seeking to obfuscate and delay the release of public records, and thus, accountability.



POLITICO

**Trump Is
Weaponizing the
Government Against
His Enemies.
It Doesn't Mean
He'll Succeed**

Since the beginning of the Trump-Vance administration, Democracy Forward has launched hundreds of investigations into the most pressing crises of the day.

Within those investigations, we have utilized federal and state public records laws to submit **more than 2,000 FOIA and other open records requests** to uncover information in the public interest and filed **28 FOIA lawsuits** to compel the disclosure of certain records owed to the public when agencies have not followed the law's requirements for responsiveness. Our investigations aim to shed light on the weaponization of justice and law enforcement, the unlawful withholding of federal funding, the destruction of key governmental functions,

efforts to evade our nation's transparency laws, and much more. We have also sent letters demanding oversight and accountability of other potential federal misconduct: highlighting this administration's likely violations of the [Antideficiency Act](#), [Hatch Act](#), and [Federal Records Act](#) this past year.

DEMOCRACY FORWARD

December 23, 2025

VIA Electronic Delivery

U.S. Office of Special Counsel

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DEMOCRACY FORWARD

December 23, 2025

VIA Electronic Delivery

U.S. Government Accountability Office
The Honorable Gene Dodaro
Comptroller General of the United States
441 G Street, NW Washington, DC 20548
OfficeoftheComptrollerGeneral@gao.gov
AntideficiencyActRep@gao.gov

Re: Potential violations of the Antideficiency Act

Dear Comptroller General Dodaro:

Democracy Forward Foundation ("DF"), a national legal organization that conducts investigations and litigation to promote government accountability, is writing to inform the U.S. Government Accountability Office ("GAO") of serious potential violations of the Antideficiency Act ("ADA") during the historic government shutdown of October and November 2025. Congress enacted the ADA to ensure that executive branch officials do not incur obligations or expend funds absent lawful appropriations.¹ The ADA is an important safeguard for our Constitution's command that no money be spent without lawful appropriation, and it is critical that violations do not go unaddressed. As the Department of Justice's Office of Legal Counsel wrote in an opinion in 1980,

"The manifest purpose of the Antideficiency Act is to insure that Congress will determine for what purposes the government's money is to be spent and how much for each purpose. This goal is so elementary to a proper distribution of governmental powers that when the original statutory prohibition against obligations in excess of appropriations was introduced in 1870, the only responsive comment on the floor of the House was, 'I believe that is the law of the land now.'²

The ADA prohibits federal officers and employees from (1) making or authorizing expenditures or obligations in excess of available appropriations or before an appropriation is made and (2) accepting voluntary services for the government or employing personal services beyond those

¹ 31 U.S.C. §§ 1341-1342, 1517.

² *Applicability of the Antideficiency Act Upon a Lapse in an Agency's Appropriation*, Department of Justice (April 25, 1980), <https://www.justice.gov/olc/opinion/applicability-antideficiency-act-upon-lapse-agency%E2%80%99s-appropriation>

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Our Impact at a Glance



As of February 2026

2,059

Public Records Requests

Since January 2025, we have submitted 2,059 public records requests. Of those, we sent 1,943 requests to federal agencies and 116 to state agencies.

107

Federal Department and Agency Recipients

Our investigations into the Trump-Vance administration have included more than 107 federal departments, agencies, agency subcomponents, and government corporations.

24

State Recipients

Our investigations in states have spanned across the nation, including requests to statewide, county, and local executive agencies.

28

FOIA Lawsuits

As the administration failed to comply with the FOIA, we have sued the federal government 28 times to compel compliance and force the release of records.

21,377

Pages Received

Through our investigations and subsequent litigation, we have received more than 21,000 pages of records.

Our investigations have also made headlines in national and regional news outlets...



The Free Press: The Man Behind Trump's Attack on the Fed (Jan. 20, 2026)



Common Dreams: Watchdog Demands to Know If Trump Admin Colluded With Big Oil in Lead-Up to Venezuela Attack (Jan. 7, 2026)



Reuters: Exclusive: Trump appointee inspired by conservative media outlet to push for probe of Democratic congressman (Dec. 22, 2025)



Washington Blade: Democracy Forward files FOIA lawsuit after HHS deadnames Rachel Levine (Dec. 19, 2025)



AP News: The Social Security Administration plans to cut field office visits by 50%. What it means for you (Dec. 5, 2025)



Newsweek: Judge Chutkan Orders Expedited Process on Epstein Files (Nov. 25, 2025)



Law360: FCC Sued For Records Of Threats To ABC Over Kimmel (Nov. 21, 2025)



The Hill: Left-leaning legal group sues DOJ, FBI for Epstein records (Aug. 8, 2025)



MS Now: Lawsuit over Epstein files could expose Trump administration's handling of the matter (Aug. 11, 2025)



Axios: Trump administration faces first lawsuit to force release of Epstein files (Aug. 8, 2025)

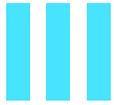


Baptist News Global: Democracy Forward and Interfaith Alliance seek records of 'anti-Christian' task force (Jun. 1, 2025)



FedScoop: Democracy Forward requests records on DOGE's reported AI use (Mar. 3, 2025)

To read more about Democracy Forward's broader legal work and impact, check out our [2025 Impact Report](#), *Courage is the New Currency: Made for this Moment, Ready for the Next.*



Highlights of our Federal Investigations

Weaponization of the Justice Department & Law Enforcement

Democracy Forward has launched numerous investigations into the Trump-Vance administration's weaponization of the U.S. Department of [Justice](#) (DOJ) and [law enforcement](#) to pursue personal political interests and seek retribution against its supposed enemies.

To shed light on these efforts, we have:

01.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit regarding the government's [handling](#) and potential coverup surrounding the release of the Jeffrey Epstein Files, which has garnered extraordinary attention from the American public, Congress, and the press as the government has stonewalled releasing key files.

02.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit against the Federal Housing Finance Agency (FHFA) and its Office of Inspector General to shed light on FHFA Director William J. Pulte, a stalwart Trump-Vance ally, who has made highly publicized and politicized "criminal referrals" to the DOJ against several prominent public officials, including U.S. Senator Adam Schiff, Federal Reserve Governor Lisa Cook, and New York Attorney General Letitia James. Records [released](#) as a result of our suit revealed that the agency had acted inconsistent with the investigative safeguards of its own Office of Inspector General (FHFA-

OIG). In addition, records received by Democracy Forward through this [investigation](#) show that the administration's criminal probe of U.S. Representative Eric Swalwell began after Pulte referred allegations by a conservative website to the FHFA-OIG and sent a referral to the DOJ himself.

03.

Launched an [investigation](#) into the DOJ's efforts to overhaul the Civil Rights Division – including by targeting and pushing out career civil servants and by reshaping the federal government's role in our country's elections with a new voting section [head](#) who has myriad ties to election deniers.

04.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit against the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to shed light on public comments by FCC Chairman Brendan Carr suggesting that the agency could consider punitive

action against broadcast entities if they continued to air commentary critical of the Trump-Vance administration – citing, as one public example, remarks made by television host [Jimmy Kimmel](#).

05.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit regarding inappropriate communications by the U.S. Marshals Service with federal judges on pending cases related to the insurrection of January 6, 2021.

The New York Times

ABC Pulls Jimmy Kimmel Off Air for Charlie Kirk Comments After F.C.C. Pressure



Ethical Misconduct of Senior Officials

Since inauguration, the Trump-Vance administration has shown blatant disregard for the laws and norms intended to uphold ethics and integrity standards among government officials – including Trump himself. Indeed, when asked about limits to his power, Trump [stated](#) that he is restrained only by his “own morality.” Nonetheless, we are working to shine light on the egregious ethical violations committed during this administration and have:

01.

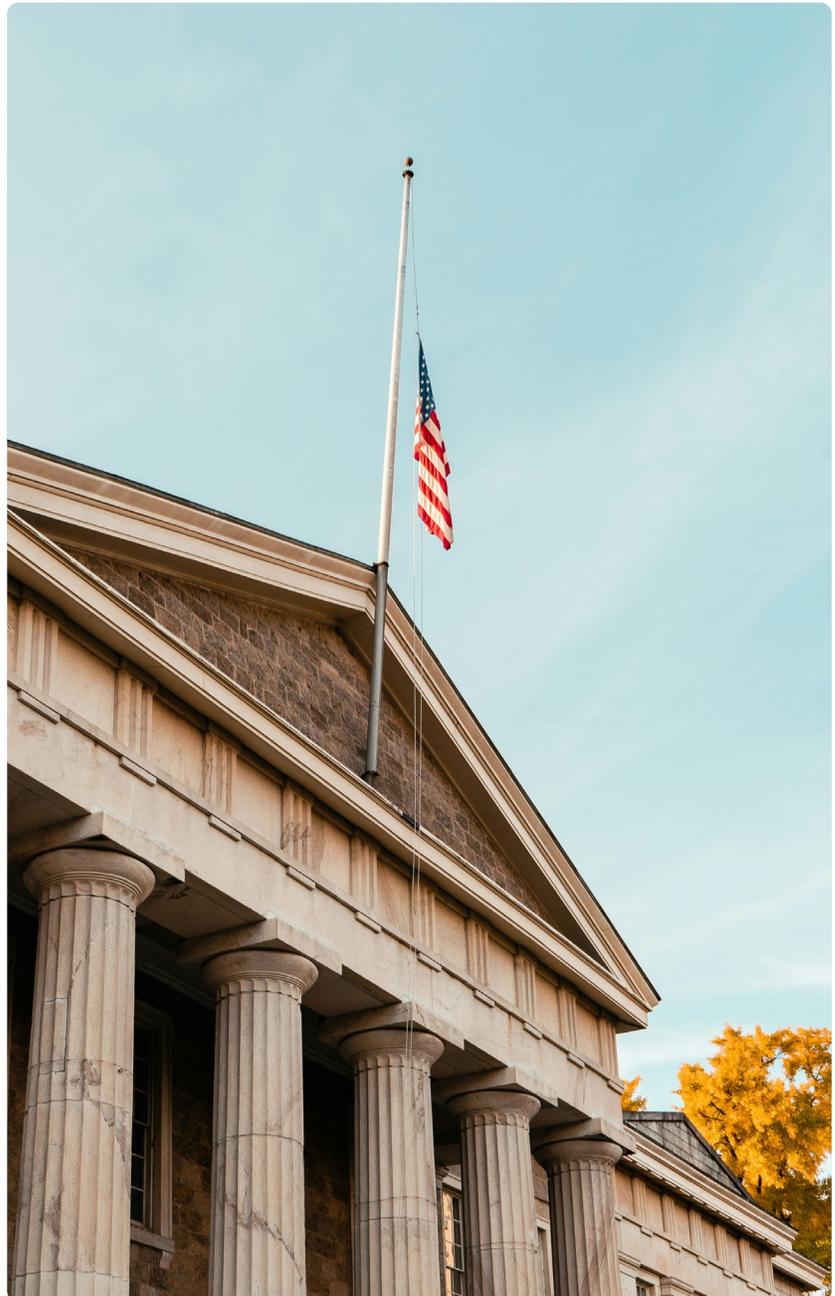
Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit to probe alarming [reports](#) that Trump is seeking \$230 million in compensation from DOJ for damages from previous cases against him. The request raises grave ethical concerns for Trump personally and for personnel at the Department.

02.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit seeking a recording that [reportedly](#) captures now-White House Border Czar Tom Homan accepting a \$50,000 cash payment from undercover FBI agents in September 2024 in exchange for promising to help the agents, posing as businessmen, gain contracts related to border security – shortly before joining the Trump-Vance administration. In litigation, the government has now asserted that they can neither confirm nor deny the existence of such recordings because of personal privacy interests under certain FOIA exemptions.

03.

Launched an [investigation](#) into U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Kristi Noem’s public affairs shop [funneling](#) hundreds of millions of dollars for advertising campaigns regarding the southern border to firms tied to her personal friends.



Unlawful Withholding of Federal Funding

The Trump-Vance administration has recklessly slashed federal funding for essential programs that serve millions of Americans. These haphazard cuts have posed devastating risks to communities that rely on federal funding for critical services such as [housing](#), [public health](#), [education](#), and [economic stability](#). **To shed light on these attempts, we have:**

01.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit against the DOJ and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to compel the release of records relating to the abrupt termination of more than \$800 million in grants that support programs on violence prevention, crime victim services, and community safety.

02.

Launched [investigations](#) into the impacts of the so-called *One Big Beautiful Bill* and the record-breaking government shutdown on critical services, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Head Start.

03.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit to shed light on cuts to the U.S. Department of Education's research arm – the Institute of Education Sciences – and the cancellation of 89 contracts worth nearly \$900 million.

04.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit against the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) over Memorandum M-25-13, which directed agencies to pause or freeze nearly all federal financial assistance.



Farmers put plans, investments on hold under Trump USDA spending freeze



Dismantling of the Federal Government

The Trump-Vance administration has waged an all-out [assault](#) on the federal government, from large-scale firings of thousands of federal employees to the termination of countless programs that serve the American people. Elon Musk’s so-called DOGE led the charge with these efforts in the first half of 2025, proudly wielding a “chainsaw” for “bureaucracy.” As Musk’s star waned following his public falling out with the president, the efforts to dismantle the government have [centered](#) on OMB and Director Russell Vought. The results have been catastrophic and far from [transparent](#) and [efficient](#), as had been [promised](#). **To shed light on these efforts, we have:**

01.

Launched an [investigation](#) into the shuttering of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), one of the first targets of federal spending cuts, even though the agency represents a fraction of one percent of the federal budget.

We have since [filed](#) a lawsuit compelling the release of critical data and planning documents related to global efforts to combat HIV infections and AIDS-related deaths, which have faltered following cuts to USAID.

02.

Launched an [investigation](#) into the dismantling of the U.S. Department of Education and the [transferring](#) of functions assigned to it by Congress to other agencies in the federal government.

03.

Launched an [investigation](#) into the destruction of the White House’s East Wing, seeking communications regarding the demolition, construction plans for the ballroom, environmental impact statement, communications with donors, and much more.

04.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit and a motion for rapid relief to compel the release of records pertaining to Agency Reduction-in-Force and Reorganization Plans.

05.

Launched numerous investigations and [filed](#) lawsuits to compel agencies to release records regarding the use of artificial intelligence in executing the administration’s deregulation agenda, monitoring of employees, and targeting of visa holders.

We’ve received [documents](#) including a “policy review playbook” from the General Services Administration (GSA) showing how the administration has directed agencies to rapidly employ AI to carry out its deregulatory agenda.

06.

Launched numerous [investigations](#) to shed light on DOGE staffing, DOGE’s efforts to gain access to extremely sensitive data, and DOGE’s agreements with agencies.

The Washington Post

**The year
Trump broke
the federal
government**

Unsecured Messaging and Reckless Records Management

[Media reports](#) have exposed a troubling pattern of Trump-Vance administration officials using [non-governmental email accounts](#) and [disappearing messaging applications](#) like Signal to conduct government business – including sharing highly sensitive or classified information on personal devices. These reckless communications and record-keeping practices by government officials may violate federal records laws and undermine the public’s right to a transparent and accountable government. Democracy Forward is investigating the use of ephemeral messaging and personal email accounts across the Trump-Vance administration. **To date, we have:**

01.

Launched an investigation and filed a [lawsuit](#) to compel the production of documents related to the Trump-Vance administration’s efforts to disappear hundreds of people to prisons in El Salvador, including the notorious prison known as CECOT. One of Democracy Forward’s cases secured the [release](#) of the [agreement](#) with El Salvador that allowed these deportations to take place.

02.

Launched an [investigation](#) into U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi’s messaging practices in light of Trump’s [demand](#) via a social media post that she prosecute public officials, including Senator Schiff, New York Attorney General James, and former FBI Director James Comey, along with other public officials.

03.

Launched an [investigation](#) into DOJ Assistant Attorney General for the Civil Rights Division Harmeet Dhillon’s [usage](#) of text messages for key division priority communications with her subordinates.

04.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit to shed light on former Acting U.S. Attorney Ed Martin’s conduct and communications, including his usage of direct messages on social media platforms to conduct government business.



DEMOCRACY
FORWARD

**Challenge Against
the Trump
Administration’s
Black Site Agreement
with El Salvador to
Disappear People to a
“Tropical Gulag”**



Attacks on Civil Rights, Education, and Equity

The administration relentlessly attacked diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives throughout its first year. These efforts ranged from the signing of [executive orders](#) to the [weaponization](#) of the agencies that historically have worked on these issues and the dismissal of career staff who worked on DEIA initiatives.

To shed light on these efforts, we have:

01.

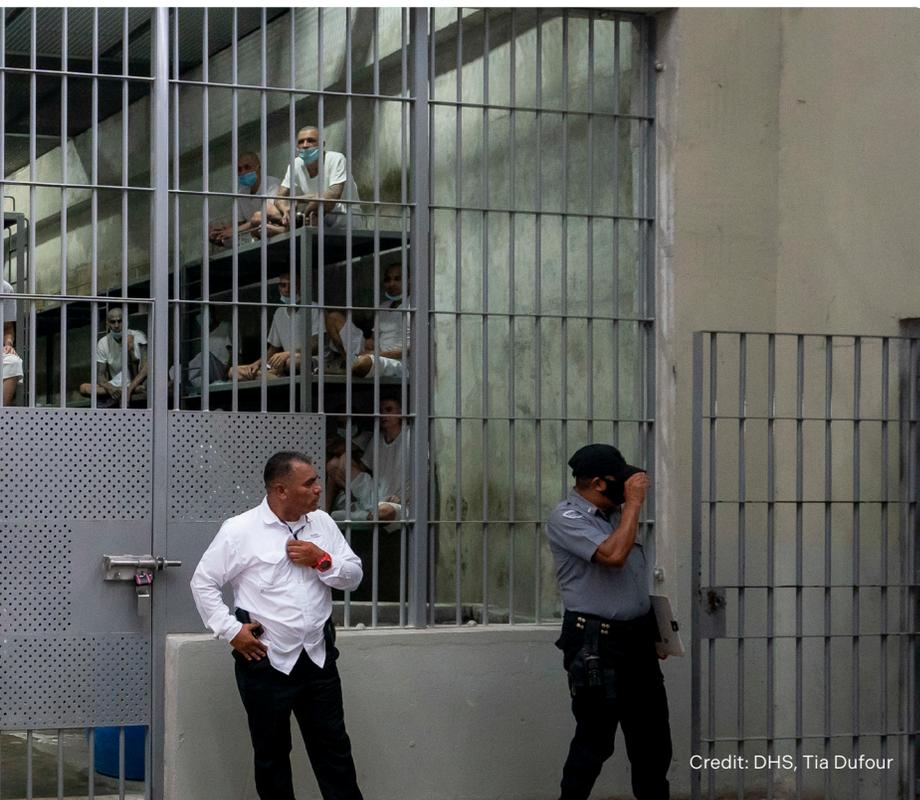
Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit to obtain records on the administration's sweeping efforts to dismantle federal DEIA programs, including regarding the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) efforts to implement Trump's executive order and eliminate all federal DEIA programs.

02.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit to compel the U.S. Census Bureau and the Department of Commerce (DOC) to release response data from sexual orientation and gender identity questions on the American Community Survey, which is used to ensure LGBTQ+ communities are accurately represented in federal policy.

03.

Launched an [investigation](#) and [filed](#) a lawsuit to shed light on the administration's so-called "Anti-Christian Bias" taskforce that was charged with reviewing all federal departments and agencies for alleged "anti-Christian bias" and recommending actions for the president to help him "rectify past injustices of anti-Christian conduct."



Credit: DHS, Tia Dufour



Harmful and Illegal Immigration Enforcement Actions

Under the Trump-Vance administration, DHS and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) have aggressively expanded immigration raids, causing terror and chaos in communities. White House Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller has told ICE agents to [arrest migrants](#) anywhere, including [outside](#) their [workplaces](#) and [sanctuary locations](#) like schools and places of worship, and while attempting to follow the law by [attending](#) their mandatory immigration court hearings. The administration's actions have swept up children and [students](#), including [U.S. citizens](#) who have been unlawfully deported.

[Native American tribes](#), [Puerto Rican neighborhoods](#), and other predominately [Latino communities](#) have voiced concerns that their members are being racially profiled and unlawfully arrested. The administration has been utilizing [novel technologies](#) and forming new partnerships to pursue their agenda, while aggressively using media stunts to highlight the administration's supposed successes, even when the content is highly [misleading](#).

To shed light on these efforts, we have:



01.

Launched an [investigation](#) into ICE and CBP actions in the state of Minnesota during "Operation Metro Surge," including the killings of [Renee Good](#) and [Alex Pretti](#) by immigration officers.

02.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit seeking video footage of a raid that ICE conducted in [October 2025](#) on a Chicago apartment building, reportedly detaining nearly all residents – including U.S. citizens – in violation of the residents' constitutional rights. DHS [published](#) a video valorizing this action using numerous camera angles, indicating that it was a compilation of a substantial quantity of footage edited for public relations purposes.

03.

Launched [investigations](#) into the usage of [novel technologies](#) for immigration surveillance purposes. Immigration agents have ramped up utilization of

[video surveillance](#), [drones](#), and [facial recognition applications](#) to identify protestors or people ICE [considers](#) to be violent.

04.

Launched [investigations](#) into instances of the Trump-Vance administration removing long-established safeguards put in place to protect people's personal data to pursue its harmful [immigration enforcement efforts](#).

05.

Launched an investigation and [filed](#) a lawsuit to shed light on high-level coordination between DHS and ICE officials and individuals associated with America First Legal (AFL) – a far-right group co-founded by Stephen Miller – and on ICE's controversial use of plainclothes and masked agents to carry out mass arrests while not providing identification.



The Atlantic

The Trump Administration Accidentally Texted Me Its War Plans

Democracy Forward Calls for Investigations into Federal Records Act, Hatch Act, and Antideficiency Act Violations

Democracy Forward has sent a range of investigative letters calling for agency action to address potential violations of the Federal Records Act, Hatch Act, and Antideficiency Act since the start of the Trump-Vance administration.

In spring 2025, following [revelations](#) that the nation's highest-ranking national security officials were communicating on Signal threads to coordinate classified operations, Democracy Forward [sent](#) formal demands to the National Archives and Records Administration and a series of federal agencies calling for remedial action to recover any federal records that had been unlawfully removed or taken from agency custody, and to preserve records at risk of deletion in violation of the Federal Records Act. In addition, we launched an [investigation](#) and filed a lawsuit in which the preservation of key records subject to the suit was ultimately [granted](#).

Democracy Forward, in late 2025, called for the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to investigate misconduct and potential violations of key laws by the Trump-Vance administration during the 2025 government shutdown. Our letters outline evidence that senior administration officials broke the law when they misused government resources for partisan political messaging and obligated or redirected federal funds during the lapse in appropriations.

In a [letter](#) to OSC, we detail potential violations of the Hatch Act, which bars federal officials from engaging in partisan political activity while performing official duties or using government resources. The letter describes how cabinet officials and agencies used official email systems, government websites, and even videos at airports to cast partisan blame for the shutdown – turning taxpayer-funded infrastructure into a political messaging machine.

In a separate [letter](#) to the GAO, Democracy Forward outlines potential violations of the Antideficiency Act, which codifies Congress's constitutional power of the purse. That complaint documents actions taken during the shutdown that may have unlawfully created new financial obligations or expenditures without congressional authorization, including mass layoff planning, redirection of funds to pay troops, and the purchase of two \$172 million private jets for DHS.

IV

Highlights of our State Investigations

Weaponization of Voter Data

The Trump-Vance administration has focused on perpetuating falsehoods about the 2020 election. As part of continued efforts to advance the “Big Lie,” the administration has sought sensitive voter roll [data](#) and [agreements](#) with states to require removing allegedly ineligible voters identified during a federal review of their voter rolls.

To shed light on these efforts, Democracy Forward has taken action in the following states:

01.

Arizona, Georgia, Illinois, Utah, Virginia: Launched an [investigation](#) into the federal government’s [attempts](#) to gain access to state voter rolls and to explore communications of select states with right-wing anti-voting organizations.

02.

Colorado, Georgia, West Virginia: Launched an [investigation](#) into the [activities](#) of Heather Honey, election denialist [turned](#) Deputy Assistant Secretary for Election Integrity at DHS, who took part in a call with election officials from most states in September 2025. According to state officials on the call, Honey raised 2020 election denial concerns rather than focusing on securing safeguards for 2026’s midterm elections.

03.

Colorado: Launched an [investigation](#) into [reports](#) that Jeff Small, a consultant and former Chief of Staff to Rep. Lauren Boebert, was reaching out on the behalf of the administration to election officials throughout Colorado seeking to examine election equipment.



POLITICO

‘There’s something bigger going on’: State election chiefs rebuff Trump bid to seize voter rolls

Credit: Penn State Creative Commons



State Partnerships to Expand Detention Facilities

To drive forward its hardline immigration agenda and [increase capacity](#) for detention given [overcrowding](#) at its [facilities](#), the Trump-Vance administration partnered with states to build capacity. **We are conducting [investigations](#) to shed light on these issues:**

01.

Florida: Launched an [investigation](#) into the construction and operations of the so-called [Alligator Alcatraz](#), a \$450 million detention center built on an isolated airstrip in the Florida Everglades.

02.

Indiana: Launched an [investigation](#) into the partnership between DHS and the state of Indiana to construct and operate a facility called the [Speedway Slammer](#).

03.

Nebraska: Launched an [investigation](#) into DHS's partnership with Nebraska – dubbed “Cornhusker Clink” – to expand ICE detention space.

Harmful Delays and Denials in State Requests for Emergency Aid

Across the country this year, devastating storms – from deadly flooding in Texas to catastrophic fires in southern California – have shown the vital role our emergency response agencies serve. However, the Trump-Vance administration's actions have heightened [concerns](#) about the future of emergency response and resilience, as they have reduced [staffing](#) and [funding](#) for these crucial emergency response services – even at times [speculating](#) about the shuttering of the Federal Emergency Management Administration (FEMA) – when predictions indicate a [growing need](#) for these services.

To shed light on these issues, we have:

Launched an [investigation](#) into how the current administration's inaction and delays impacted assistance efforts in responding to the flooding in Texas.

AP

Texas flooding, and politics around it, underscore the challenges Trump faces in replacing FEMA

V

The Road Ahead

Transparency and accountability have never been more important, nor more at risk, than now. As we mark one year of the Trump-Vance administration, myriad unanswered questions remain regarding its brazen abuses of power and self-dealing.

We will continue going to court to force compliance with public records laws even as the administration throws up new roadblocks in the FOIA process, and we will continue to shine light on government misconduct and violations of our laws by [publicizing](#) the findings of our investigations.

Democracy Forward Foundation, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, is a national legal organization that advances democracy and social progress through litigation, policy, public education, and regulatory engagement. For more information, please visit democracyforward.org.







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