



## Republicans in Congress mostly shrug as Musk and DOGE set sights on spending

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Deirdre Walsh



Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., answers questions at the U.S. Capitol following a weekly Republican policy luncheon on Tuesday.

*Win McNamee/Getty Images*

For the second week in a row, Republicans on Capitol Hill are facing questions about whether recent moves by the Trump administration are eroding Congress' constitutional power of the purse. And for the second week in a row, most GOP lawmakers have responded to those questions by largely shrugging them off.

The issue has been front and center this week after Elon Musk, President Trump's pick to lead a newly established entity called the Department of Government Efficiency ([DOGE](#)), announced he was in the process of "[shutting down](#)" the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). His comments came after the Trump administration had already announced a 90-day pause on foreign aid.



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## WORLD

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Last week, the concerns were fueled by a memo from the Office of Management and Budget instructing federal agencies [to pause all federal grants and other payments](#). The memo was [later rescinded](#) after a court challenge that resulted in a temporary restraining order — but the White House has said its broader effort to rein in spending will continue.

With each episode, Republicans in Congress have so far demonstrated little willingness to get crosswise with the new administration — even when it moved to reverse past decisions by lawmakers on how the government spends money.

"I think the administration has every right to demand accountability and transparency in all these programs," John Barrasso, the Senate's No. 2 GOP leader, told NPR about Musk's work to rein in USAID.



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## POLITICS

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Barrasso pointed to Secretary of State Marco Rubio's comments on Monday raising concerns about getting information about USAID's spending. Rubio later said he would be overseeing the agency and [sent a letter](#) to congressional committees saying he was reviewing and reorganizing its operations.

Congress authorized spending for the agency through the annual appropriations process, but many Republicans are now saying that a review of foreign aid programs is warranted.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., maintained Tuesday that USAID wasn't closing down, but told reporters the Trump administration has "the right to review funding and how those decisions are made and what priorities are being funded."

"I think that's true of any administration when they come in," Thune said.

### **Many Republicans say foreign aid needs review**

The reaction to Musk and the DOGE initiative has underscored the already sharp divide on Capitol Hill in the opening weeks of the new administration. While Democrats have sought to frame Musk's work as an undemocratic power grab by an unelected billionaire, Republicans have described it as a long overdue review of foreign aid.

"There's a lot of the spending that goes on through USAID that does not appear to be consistent with U.S. policy, and so I'm all for a review to make sure that taxpayer dollars are going to programs and people that are consistent with our government's policies," Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, told reporters.

Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the agency was due for a review, especially when it comes to overhead costs. But she was a rare GOP lawmaker who publicly raised questions about how Musk was proceeding.

"The law is very specific and if there's going to be a reorganization of USAID then Congress has to be informed 15 days in advance and a detailed explanation of any changes has to be provided."

Collins said she saw the Rubio letter about reviewing the agency but did not believe it "satisfies the requirements of the law." Collins did not say what her panel would do in response.



Elon Musk arrives ahead of the Inauguration of Donald Trump at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 20. Trump has tasked the billionaire owner of Tesla and X with leading a new government entity being called the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE.

*Pool/Getty Images*

DOGE was created by Trump, but it is not a separate Cabinet or federal agency. That has not stopped it, however, from taking fast and dramatic action, like when Musk [detailed](#) on his social media platform X that his team had gained access to payment systems inside the Treasury Department.

While some Republicans have admitted they have questions about DOGE, none have joined Democrats in calling for Musk to stop his work.



POLITICS

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Collins, for example, voiced concerns about any access by Musk or his assistants to the personal information of government employees.

"I am not sure where the authority of that would come from and it's my understanding that some of Musk's assistants have requested access to classified information or may have for which they are not cleared," she said.

"I don't think we know exactly what he is doing right now," said another GOP appropriator, Sen. John Boozman of Arkansas. "We are in the process of finding out what the path forward is," he told NPR, adding that he expected a briefing on the details of DOGE's plans.

## Others say there is nothing out of the ordinary

Other Republicans have said there's nothing unusual about a new administration wanting to come in and review spending.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., did acknowledge that an executive branch move to turn off a federal agency "runs afoul of the Constitution in the strictest sense." But he argued that former President Joe Biden took similar steps.

"It's not uncommon for presidents to flex a little bit on where they can spend and where they can stop spending," Tillis said. "Nobody should bellyache about that."



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**'Thank you for your service': Trump administration puts USAID staff on leave**

Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., pointed specifically to the Biden administration's efforts to forgive student loan debt as an example of an administration stepping on Congress' spending authority. That push, Hawley said, "remains the high watermark for presidential lawlessness vis-à-vis Congress in my lifetime."

"What Trump is doing in terms of his top to bottom review of government is not unusual," Hawley said.

## The upcoming fight over funding the government

For now, the reaction inside the GOP about giving Trump and Musk broad leeway over how federal money is spent centers on the debate over foreign aid. In recent years there has been a split in the party about how much the U.S. should be directing to other countries. During the 2024 campaign, Trump's "America first" message resonated with the party's base, and that dynamic could continue to play out in upcoming congressional debates on federal funding.



POLITICS

**Elon Musk is barreling into government with DOGE, raising unusual legal questions**

The OMB action last week involved trillions in federal spending for both international

and domestic programs that Congress debated and authorized. Few GOP lawmakers publicly objected, even as they admitted constituents in districts across the country called their offices warning about the prospects of losing access to day care programs, Meals on Wheels, school lunch programs and other forms of assistance. The pause also risked funding for projects many Republicans inserted into spending bills for roads, water projects and other community programs in their states and districts.

Republican lawmakers will soon face another chance to put their stamp on federal spending. Agencies are scheduled to run out of money on March 14 unless Congress approves legislation to avoid a partial shutdown.

It's unclear what the White House or Musk will demand in any spending deal. But two weeks into the Trump administration's shock and awe of executive actions aimed at reshaping the federal government, there's little sign congressional Republicans will stand in the way of additional efforts to step on their own authority.

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