



POLITICS

Elon Musk tightens grip on federal government as Democrats raise alarms



1 of 4 | Elon Musk arrives on stage to speak at an indoor Presidential Inauguration parade event in Washington, Monday, Jan. 20, 2025. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)



BY [CHRIS MEGERIAN](#)

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WASHINGTON (AP) — [Elon Musk](#) is rapidly consolidating control over large swaths of the federal government with President [Donald Trump](#) 's blessing, sidelining career officials, gaining access to sensitive databases and dismantling a leading source of humanitarian assistance.

The speed and scope of his work has been nothing short of stunning. In a little more than two weeks since [Trump took office](#), the world's richest man has created an alternative power structure inside the federal government for the purpose of cutting spending and pushing out employees. None of this is happening with congressional approval, inviting a constitutional clash over [the limits of presidential authority](#).

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Trump says Musk is doing his bidding

Musk has been named as a special government employee, which subjects him to less stringent rules on ethics and financial disclosures than other workers. Trump has given Musk office space in the White House complex where he oversees a team of people at the so-called [Department of Government Efficiency](#). The team has been dispersed throughout federal agencies to gather information and deliver edicts. Some of them were spotted on Monday at the Department of Education, which Trump has vowed to abolish.

Republicans defend Musk as simply carrying out Trump's slash-and-burn campaign promises. Trump made no secret of his desire to put Musk, the billionaire entrepreneur behind the electric automaker Tesla and the rocket company SpaceX, in charge of retooling the federal government.

"Elon can't do and won't do anything without our approval," Trump told reporters in the Oval Office on Monday.

The Republican president also played down concerns about Musk's conflict of interests as he flexes his power over the bureaucracy even though his businesses face regulatory scrutiny and have federal contracts.

"Where we think there's a conflict or there's a problem, we won't let him go near it, but he has some very good ideas," Trump said.

Musk persists in spite of Democrats' outrage

Democrats, for their part, accused Musk of leading a coup from within the government by amassing unaccountable and illegal power.

"We will do everything in our power in the Senate and the House to stop this outrage," Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland said. "And in the meantime, since we don't have many Republican colleagues who want to help us, we are doing everything we can with our colleagues through the courts to make sure that we uphold the rule of law."

The apex of Musk's work so far came on Monday at the Washington headquarters for the U.S. Agency for International Development, or [USAID](#), where yellow police tape blocked access to the lobby and hundreds of employees were locked out of computer systems. Musk said Trump had [agreed to let him shutter the agency](#).

"It's not an apple with a worm in it, what we have is just a ball of worms," Musk said of the world's largest provider of humanitarian, development and security assistance. "You've got to basically get rid of the whole thing. It's beyond repair."

Federal workers are in uncharted territory

Musk has also turned his attention to the General Services Administration, or GSA, which manages federal government buildings. An email sent last week from the Washington headquarters instructed regional managers to begin terminating leases on roughly 7,500 federal offices nationwide.

The initiative is being led by Nicole Hollander, according to an agency employee who requested anonymity to discuss internal matters. Hollander describes herself on LinkedIn as an employee at X, Musk's social media platform.

"This has gone beyond the pale. This is out of control. This is not a normal situation," said Keya Chatterjee, executive director of Free DC, a local advocacy organization. She participated in a protest on Monday outside the Office of Personnel Management, which is one of the lesser-known federal agencies key to Musk's agenda.

Musk's work has unnerved federal employees who are being [nudged toward the exits](#). On Sunday night, concerns swept through the workforce that they could be locked out of internal human resources system, denying them access to their own personnel files that showed pay history, length of service and qualifications. Supervisors in some agencies encouraged employees to download their records, called an SF-50, to personal computers so that they could prove their employment history in the event of disputes.

Musk's penchant for dabbling

Musk has been tinkering with things his entire life, learning to code as a child in South Africa and becoming rich with the online payment company PayPal. He bought the social media platform Twitter a little more than two years ago, renamed it X and slashed its workforce while turning it into his personal political megaphone.

Now Musk is popping open the hood on the federal government like it's one of his cars or rockets.

"The Silicon Valley playbook to disrupt the status quo — by disregarding and disobeying rules that

you don't like — is in full effect here," said [Rob Lalka](#), an expert on entrepreneurship and innovation in business at Tulane University.

One of the most significant steps was gaining access to [the U.S. Treasury payment system](#), which is responsible for 1 billion payments per year totaling \$5 trillion. It includes sensitive information involving bank accounts and Social Security payments.

"No one outside of the staff doing the work ever asked to have access to the payment files," said Richard Gregg, who spent four decades working for Treasury and oversaw the payment system as fiscal assistant secretary.

It's unclear what Musk wants to do with the payment system. He's claimed that he could trim \$1 trillion from the federal deficit "just by addressing waste, fraud and abuse."

"That's the biggest data hack ever in the world," Sen. Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat, told reporters in Madison. "I am outraged about it."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, a Democrat from New York, said Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent must revoke Musk's access to the payment system.

"We must halt this unlawful and dangerous power grab," he said on Capitol Hill.

A group representing retirees and union workers sued Bessent and the Treasury Department on Monday to get them to stop sharing personal and financial information with DOGE.

Trump rewards Musk's fealty

Musk's role is partially a reward for his work on behalf of Trump during the campaign. He spent roughly \$250 million supporting Trump through America PAC, which included door-to-door canvassing and digital advertising.

Although the PAC has not announced its next plans, Musk has suggested that he could endorse primary challenges to Republican lawmakers who defy Trump's agenda.

"The more I've gotten to know President Trump, the more I like him," Musk said in a conversation streamed live on X. "Frankly, I love the guy. He's great."

Musk also described his work overhauling the federal government in existential terms, making it clear that he would push as hard and as far as he could.

"If it's not possible now, it will never be possible. This is our shot," he said. "This is the best hand of cards we're ever going to have. If we don't take advantage of this best hand of cards, it's never going to happen."

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