



# The fallout from Trump's war on Harvard will long outlast his presidency

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**Donald Trump has had a busy seven days. On Monday, he threatened to redirect \$3bn in Harvard research funding to vocational schools. On Tuesday, the White House sent a letter to federal agencies, instructing them to review the approximately \$100m in contracts the government has awarded Harvard and "find alternative vendors" where possible. On Wednesday, he had more to say on the matter still.**

"Harvard's got to behave themselves," he told reporters gathered in the Oval Office. "Harvard is treating our country with great disrespect, and all they're doing is getting in deeper and deeper and deeper."

When combined with other administration attempts – freezing more than \$3bn in research grants and suspending foreign students from enrolling in Harvard – Trump's directives represent a frontal attack on one of America's most prestigious, and wealthy, institutions of higher education.

Even if court challenges overrule some of these actions – some have already been put on hold – the impact is being felt across the landscape of American higher education.

"They're doing multiple things every single day, some of those things are sneaking through," says Greg Wolfson, president of the American Association of University Professors. "But more importantly, they're changing the culture. They're changing people."



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'If this can happen to Harvard it can happen to any US university,' says a student

At Harvard's commencement ceremonies on Thursday, students said there was a "palpable concern" on campus.

"People sort of knew Trump was trying some of these moves but [they were] shocked when it happens," admits one graduate, a British national who requested anonymity because he was concerned public comments could threaten his US work visa. "It feels like the nuclear option."

"If this can happen to Harvard it can happen to any university in the country," he adds.

But the repercussions of this apparent Harvard-Trump fight run far deeper than the management of a single Ivy League university. Could the measures Trump is taking mark, as some suggest, the latest, albeit most ambitious, step by conservatives to erode some of the traditional pillars of support for the Democratic Party?

If that is the case, the campus has become a pivotal battle in shaping America's cultural and political landscape.

## Accusations of antisemitism and bias

Trump and his administration have offered various explanations for their actions, including a perceived lack of conservatives among the ranks of Harvard's professors, along with suggestions of admitting too many foreign students and financial links to China.

But according to the White House, the most immediate cause has been the university's apparent failure to address antisemitism on campus, in the wake of anti-Israel protests at universities across the US since the start of the Gaza war.

In December 2023, three prominent university presidents - including the then-president of Harvard, Claudine Gay - struggled to answer whether calling for the "genocide of Jews" violated their student conduct codes on bullying and harassment, sparking a firestorm of criticism.

Dr Gay, who was asked the question at a congressional hearing about antisemitism on US college campuses, answered that it depended on the context. She later apologised, telling the student newspaper: "When words amplify distress and pain, I don't know how you could feel anything but regret."



Getty Images

Former president of Harvard, Claudine Gay



On the campaign trail last year, Trump promised to cut off federal funding and government accreditation for colleges that he said were engaging in "antisemitic propaganda". Once Trump returned to the White House in January, he began following through on this.

Several universities - including Columbia, which saw some of the most high profile protests - agreed to sweeping changes in campus security rules and closer supervision of its Middle Eastern, South Asian and African Studies departments.

In April, Harvard released the results of a university task force review (commissioned before Trump's election) of antisemitism and anti-Muslim prejudice on its own campus. It found that many Jewish and Muslim students faced bias, exclusion and alienation from the university curriculum and its community.

However, the administration's demands go well beyond calls to address antisemitism. In a letter to the university, its "Joint Task Force to Combat Anti-Semitism" laid out a laundry list of changes that Harvard must make, including terminating diversity programmes, reforming admissions and hiring, screening foreign students for views hostile to "American values", and expanding and protecting "viewpoint diversity" among students and faculty.



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Trump promised to cut off federal funding and government accreditation for colleges that he said were engaging in "antisemitic propaganda"

Trump's shock-and-awe strategy of rapid and aggressive pressure has stunned many in higher education, who never imagined the scope of the demands or the force behind them.

"It's not about higher education," argues Mr Wolfson. "Higher education is one of the levers they see as critical to transforming our society."

But the potential for a long-term transformation could largely depend on whether the majority of American universities choose to accommodate the administration's

demands - or whether it stands and fights, as Harvard is trying to do.

## An across-the-board war

While Harvard has been the most prominent target of the administration's ire, and the most visible in its resistance, it is just one of many high-profile American universities that has received funding cuts or been subject of investigations.

Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania have reported that the administration has suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in their research grants. The Department of Education has launched investigations of 10 universities for alleged antisemitism - and warned dozens of others that they could face similar inquiries. It is also investigating 52 universities for illegal race-based programmes.

To some, this all amounts to an across-the-board war on elite higher education by the Trump administration in an effort to reshape universities in a more conservative-friendly image. To others, this is no bad thing.

"Universities are not about the pursuit of knowledge, they're about the forceful pushing of a left-wing world view," Charlie Kirk, founder of the conservative group Turning Point USA, said in a Fox News interview last month. "We're here to shake it up."



Getty Images

Charlie Kirk, founder of the conservative group Turning Point USA, believes universities have been pushing a "left-wing world view"

Many on the right have long viewed American college campuses as hotbeds of liberal indoctrination, whether it has taken the form of left-wing anti-war radicalism in the 1960s, "political correctness" of the 1990s, Occupy Wall Street anti-capitalism of the 2000s or the Black Lives Matter movement and anti-Israel demonstrations in recent years.

Polling has illustrated a certain divide in beliefs between those who have and haven't attended college. In a recent survey by the polling company Civiqs, non-college

graduates were split on the job Trump is doing in office, with 49% disapproving and 47% approving.

College graduates, on the other hand, had a significantly different view, as 58% disapproved of Trump's performance in office versus only 38% who approved.

"I think a lot of this blowback is from the sense that they have become the universities of blue [Democratic] America, and that this is the consequence," says Rick Hess, senior fellow and director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute.

## **Universities 'brought this on themselves'**

In recent years, according to Mr Hess, American higher education has become more closely tied to the government and more reliant on government funding.

He says that the new Trump team has simply adopted levers of control over higher education employed by recent Democratic administrations – including civil rights investigations, federal anti-discrimination laws and control over funding.

"In classic Trump form," he added, "it's absolutely the case that these levers have been turned up to 11."

And there are fewer procedural and legal safeguards than there were under the Joe Biden and Barack Obama presidencies.

"It's both an evolution and a revolution," says Mr Hess.

But it is one, he argues, that universities have brought on themselves by being overtly political during Trump's first term and making elite school the face of American higher education.

"The price for collecting billions a year in tax dollars is that institutions should both honour the promises they make, such as enforcing civil rights law, and hew to a mission in which they explicitly serve the whole nation," says Mr Hess.

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Withholding federal funding from universities may be a new challenge for higher education, but to some this is just the latest in a long effort by conservatives to undercut key traditional pillars of liberal power.

Through a combination of legislation and court rules, the influence of labour unions – which had provided the Democratic Party with volunteer personnel and funds – had diminished long before Trump succeeded in winning over white working-class voters in his three presidential runs.

State-level lawsuit reforms have also curtailed the vast sums that trial lawyers could contribute to Democratic coffers. And ongoing efforts to shrink the government workforce – which reached a peak with Elon Musk's Doge reductions – have eroded another traditionally Democratic bloc.

However, Mr Wolfson fears that something greater could be lost if some of the Trump administration's measures are enforced.

"The fact that we have multiracial, multicultural, multinational universities is a boon to our universities," he says. "It creates really diverse communities, really diverse intellectual thought."

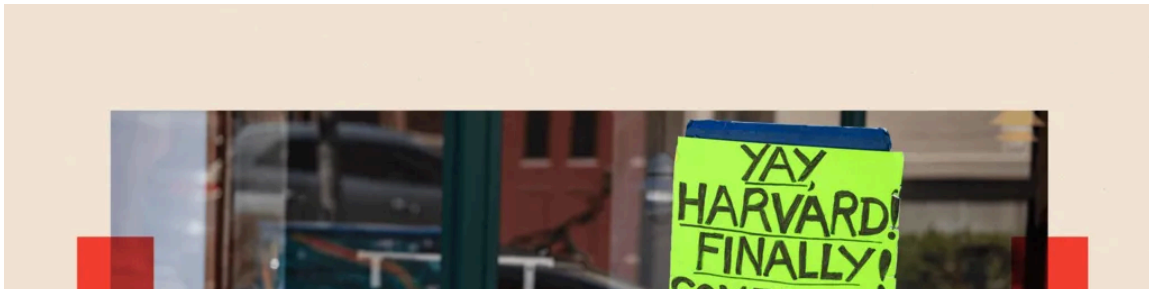
## How the Ivy Leagues fought back

Harvard - perhaps best known for its renowned law school - has turned the courts into its principal tool to resist Trump's pressure.

On Thursday, a federal judge indefinitely suspended the administration's attempts to prohibit foreign students from receiving visas to attend the university.

The university has also sued to prevent the Trump administration from terminating more than \$2.2bn in federal grants, although that case is pending.

"The trade-off put to Harvard and other universities is clear," Harvard wrote in its complaint filed with a Massachusetts federal court. "Allow the government to micromanage your academic institution or jeopardise the institution's ability to pursue medical breakthroughs, scientific discoveries, and innovative solutions."

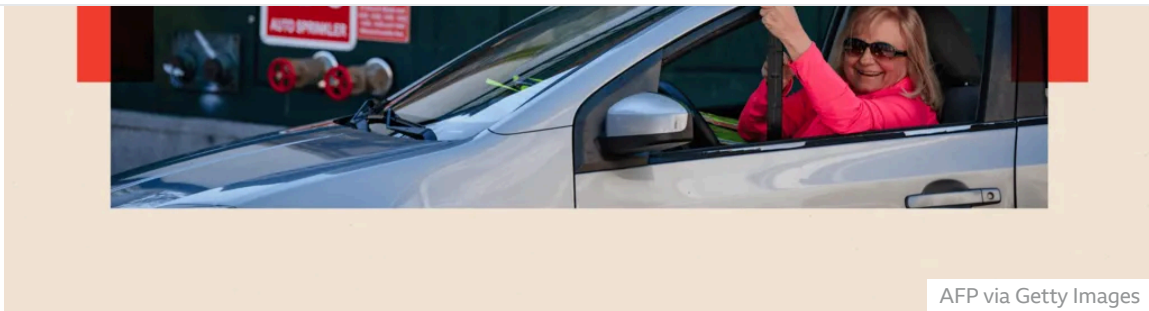


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AFP via Getty Images

Opinion polls suggest a majority of the general population support American universities and don't approve of the proposed funding cuts

Harvard's president, Alan Garber, has also defended his university, saying that Harvard would be "firm" in its commitments to education and truth, during an interview with NPR.

"Harvard is a very old institution, much older than the country," he continued. "As long as there has been a United States of America, Harvard has thought that its role is to serve the nation."

Trump, meanwhile, has shared strong words of his own. "Harvard wants to fight," he said on Wednesday. "They want to show how smart they are, and they're getting their ass kicked."

## Breaching the walls of the ivory tower

Opinion polls show that Trump's political base supports his efforts, and the underlying message. Yet those same polls suggest a majority of the general population support American universities and don't approve of his proposed funding cuts.

And opinion aside, the practicality of achieving such a fundamental reordering of America's system of higher education, even with all the tools at the federal government's disposal, is a daunting task.

According to Mr Wolfson, however, repairing what he says is the damage being done to academic independence will be equally challenging.

A growing number of members of the American Association of University Professors fear the consequences of expressing political views or conducting disfavoured research.

"The destruction is real," argues Mr Wolfson. "Even if the courts step in, there will still be a massive undermining of the higher education project in this country due to Trump's reckless, reckless moves."

Mr Hess, who has pushed for conservative education reform for years, is less concerned. He believes that Trump's chaotic, scattershot approach - including last week's comments - could end up less effective than a more methodical restructuring of American universities.

"This is all an ambitious experiment," Mr Hess said. "Whether it's a strategy that's going to work is very much an open question."

One thing seems clear, however. Even if American universities resist - or outlast - Trump's efforts, they are no longer insulated from the scorched-earth warfare of American politics. The walls of the ivory tower have been breached, regardless of whether one believes it is the barbarians - or liberators - at the gate.

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