

Trump v. Harvard: Reasons, Developments, and Expectations

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During the 2024 U.S. presidential election campaign, one of Donald Trump's promises was to review federal funding and accreditation for universities that failed to take adequate measures against antisemitic sentiments on their campuses.² He began fulfilling these promises soon after returning to the Oval Office.

On January 29, 2025, just days into a second term, Trump signed an executive order demanding stricter government efforts to combat antisemitism,³ citing, among other reasons, the harassment of Jewish students on campuses following the October 7, 2023, attack.

Part of such an executive order included the creation of a federal task force to fight antisemitism. This task force visited the campuses of 10 American universities, including Harvard, assessed the situation. Later, in April, research reports⁴ were published in collaboration with Harvard's Advisory Group on Antisemitism,⁵ that focused on presence of both antisemitic and anti-Muslim sentiments on campus. According to the findings, Jewish and Muslim students were frequently subjected to academic and social isolation, insults, and harassment. Additionally, 47% of Muslim and 15% of Jewish students reported feeling unsafe on campus, while 97% of Muslim and 61% of Jewish students believed that openly expressing their political views would harm them both academically and personally.⁶

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² "Trump Says US Colleges Could Lose Accreditation Over Antisemitic Propaganda," *Reuters*, September 5, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/trump-says-us-colleges-could-lose-accreditation-over-antisemitic-propaganda-if-2024-09-05/>

³ The White House, "Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism," January 29, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/additional-measures-to-combat-anti-semitism/>.

⁴ Harvard University, "FINAL Harvard ASAIB Report," April 29, 2025, <https://www.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/FINAL-Harvard-ASAIB-Report-4.29.25.pdf>;

Harvard University, "FINAL Harvard AMAAAPB Report," May 7, 2025, <https://www.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/FINAL-Harvard-AMAAAPB-Report-5.7.25.pdf>.

⁵ Harvard's Antisemitism Advisory Group was established in October 2023 by then-Harvard President Claudine Gay, in collaboration with the Biden Administration. Its goal was to develop a strategy for combating antisemitism on campus. The group ceased its work following Gay's resignation. The published report combines findings from the previous Advisory Group's work and the latest conclusions of the special task force created by President Trump.

⁶ Nell Gluckman, "Harvard Releases Reports on Campus Climate," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 7, 2025, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/harvard-releases-reports-on-campus-climate>.

Moreover, the Trump Administration identified specific areas where Harvard needed to implement reforms if it wished to continue receiving federal funding. These included admissions and hiring practices explicitly based on academic merit, the elimination of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, and restrictions on admitting foreign students deemed "hostile to American values." The pressure campaign from the administration significantly intensified in April, after the university announced it would not comply with the White House's demands.

Trump's Strategy

In August 2024, Alan Garber was appointed president of Harvard University, replacing Claudine Gay, who had resigned in January 2024 following public criticism. In response to government demands, Garber implemented several changes, including adopting a new formal definition of antisemitism. However, according to the Trump administration and other Republican conservatives, Harvard still failed to adequately protect Jewish students. In a letter sent to Harvard on April 11,⁷ the Trump administration accused several of the university's programs, including the Center for Middle Eastern Studies and the Divinity School, of fostering antisemitic sentiments and ideological bias on campus.

Later, on May 22, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a statement⁸ criticizing Harvard for failing to prevent the spread of anti-American values on campus, harassment by Hamas supporters, and physical assaults against individuals. According to the security agency, most of the agitators were foreign students.

The Department of Homeland Security also accused Harvard's leadership of collaborating with the Chinese Communist Party. On May 19, Republican members of Congress sent a letter to Garber demanding information about the university's ties with the Chinese government and its military forces.⁹ According to the congressmen, Harvard had hosted members of the paramilitary organization

⁷ "Letter Sent to Harvard," Harvard University, April 11, 2025, <https://www.harvard.edu/research-funding/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2025/04/Letter-Sent-to-Harvard-2025-04-11.pdf>.

⁸ Department of Homeland Security, "Harvard University Loses Student and Exchange Visitor Program Certification," May 22, 2025, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2025/05/22/harvard-university-loses-student-and-exchange-visitor-program-certification-pro>

⁹ U.S. House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, "Letter to Harvard University regarding Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC)," December 14, 2023, <https://selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/sites/evo-subsites/selectcommitteeontheccp.house.gov/files/evo-media-document/Harvard%20Letter:XPCC.pdf>.

Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC) at an academic seminar, an organization sanctioned by the U.S. in 2020 for gross violations of the rights of Muslim Uyghur minorities.¹⁰

Alongside these statements, the administration suspended a total of \$2.7 billion in federal grants to Harvard. In the initial phase, Harvard only requested \$250 million to continue its halted research projects. Additionally, the administration sent letters to federal agencies urging them to review the grants awarded to Harvard, grants totaling around \$100 million. Furthermore, the federal government threatens Harvard to suspend an additional \$1 billion in scientific funding. The targeted restriction of research funding, even in critical fields such as genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and others, signals that the administration is ready to keep pressuring the university and push its agenda, even at the cost of hindering scientific progress.

The Trump administration has additional leverage against Harvard. Like other private universities, Harvard is exempt from certain taxes due to its involvement in federally prioritized scientific activities. Considering Trump's recent statements, it is possible that Harvard could lose its tax-exempt status, which allows the university to save several hundred million dollars annually. In 2023 alone, according to Bloomberg's calculations, Harvard saved \$465 million due to its favorable tax status. This leverage becomes more realistic considering that the House of Representatives has already passed a law that proposes tax increases for private universities.¹¹

In addition to financial pressure, the Trump administration has taken another step to pressure Harvard, suspending student visas. In May, the administration attempted to revoke Harvard's certification to accept foreign students. Foreign students make up 27% of Harvard's total student body and are a significant source of revenue for the university. However, a federal court halted the implementation of this order.

Since returning to the Oval Office, the Trump administration has also been working to eliminate Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs across various sectors. From their perspective, such programs contribute to racial division and deepen discrimination, rather than promote minority rights and integration. The official position of the new administration is that if universities do not eliminate these programs, change student disciplinary regulations, revise faculty hiring practices, and genuinely

¹⁰ Melissa Korn and Lindsay Ellis, "Harvard's China Ties Become New Front in Battle with Trump," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/world/china/harvards-china-ties-become-new-front-in-battle-with-trump-6eb24947>

¹¹ Emma Whitford, "House GOP Tax Bill Targets College Endowments, Royalties, and Support From Private Foundations," *Forbes*, May 13, 2025, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/emmawhitford/2025/05/13/house-gop-tax-bill-targets-college-endowments-royalties-and-support-from-private-foundations/>.

strive to create a diverse and inclusive environment where both students and staff feel safe, they will no longer receive federal funding. Alongside Harvard, the Department of Education is additionally investigating 52 universities for similar reasons.

The actions of the Trump administration against Harvard align closely with the political agenda outlined in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025.¹² The federal government's actions are not only a reaction to campus-related issues, but can also be seen as part of this broader political project. For example, Project 2025 includes reducing federal control over higher education, potentially dismantling the Department of Education, eliminating DEI programs, revisiting accreditation and curricula, reducing the influence of the Chinese Communist Party in universities (including suspending student visas), and redirecting federal funding away from universities to vocational institutions.

Harvard's Response

Unlike Columbia University, which agreed to the administration's conditions when \$400 million of state funding was suspended, Harvard chose to resist. On April 21, following the suspension of federal funding, Harvard sued the Trump administration,¹³ accusing it of violating the First Amendment right to freedom of speech. In a statement released on April 14, Garber noted that "no government - regardless of which party is in power should dictate what private universities can teach, whom they can admit and hire, and which areas of study and inquiry they can pursue."

"The Government actions flout not just the First Amendment, but also federal laws and regulations. The Government has expressly invoked the protections against discrimination contained in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a basis for its actions. Make no mistake: Harvard rejects antisemitism and discrimination in all forms and is actively making structural reforms to eradicate antisemitism on campus. But rather than engage with Harvard regarding those ongoing efforts, the Government announced a sweeping freeze of current and future funding for medical, scientific, technological, and other research that has nothing at all to do with antisemitism and Title VI compliance." the lawsuit reads.¹⁴

¹² Paul Dans, Steven Groves, and Emma R. Bennett, eds., *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, (The Heritage Foundation, 2025), 351, https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf.

¹³ Harvard University, "Harvard Funding Freeze Order Complaint," April 2025, <https://www.harvard.edu/research-funding/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2025/04/Harvard-Funding-Freeze-Order-Complaint.pdf>.

¹⁴ Harvard University. Case 1:25-cv-11048-ADB, 6. https://www.harvard.edu/research-funding/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2025/05/amended_complaint.pdf.

Harvard sued the federal government for the second time after the Department of Homeland Security issued an order to revoke Harvard's certification for admitting foreign students. The university argued that the order was issued in violation of due process clause and did not comply with federal regulations. A federal judge temporarily halted the administration's order, but on June 4, Trump himself issued an executive order to stop issuing visas for foreign students. Within hours, Harvard amended its lawsuit, stating that both the Department of Homeland Security's decision and Trump's executive order violate the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and grossly interfere with the university's academic freedom. The judge blocked Trump's order pending the next hearing, scheduled for June 23.¹⁵

Another significant aspect of the case is public opinion surveys, which show that trust in higher education is generally declining. According to *Gallup*, ten years ago, nearly 60% of the public considered higher education to be a trustworthy sector, but by 2024, this figure had dropped to 36%.¹⁶ Additionally, a 2024 study by the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), which surveyed up to 55,000 students across 248 U.S. universities, evaluated how well freedom of speech is protected on campuses. Harvard ranked last, 248th, in this poll.¹⁷ Thus, growing public discontent and mistrust give the executive branch more freedom when making risky decisions. This creates more space for harsher policies and, in some cases, might give free rein to exercise disproportionate force. This approach seems less likely to generate feelings of injustice or empathy in society due to increased antipathy toward certain institutions, including Harvard.

The Role of the Courts - A Space for Equal Debate

The actions of the Trump administration are particularly interesting in the context of the idea of the Republicanism itself, as the republican system, which is built on mechanisms of checks and balances, is being directly tested in this case. The judicial branch, to which the Founding Fathers of America devoted significant attention in the 19th century, must once again become the battleground for truth, a place where the influences of the executive branch cannot penetrate. The Founding Fathers followed

¹⁵ Judge Extends Block on Trump Ban Prohibiting Harvard Students from Entering US. *ABC News*, June 16, 2025. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/judge-extends-block-trump-ban-prohibiting-harvard-students/story?id=122899912>.

¹⁶ Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Confidence in Higher Education Now Closely Divided," *Gallup News*, July 8, 2024, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/646880/confidence-higher-education-closely-divided.aspx>.

¹⁷ The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE), "2024 College Free Speech Rankings," Thefire.org, 2024, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/2024-college-free-speech-rankings>.

the ideas of Polybius and believed that human beings are flawed. Therefore, they came up with an interesting solution to this flaw when they integrated it into the system. The sustainability and strength of the idea of Republic does not derive from the fact that judges in the U.S. are any smarter or more honest than those in other parts of the world, but rather from the system itself, which grants them certain privileges. By granting these privileges, the chances of the executive branch being able to offer any incentives to bring them under its influence are minimized.

The ongoing legal dispute between Harvard University and the Trump administration further confirms this point. The federal court's decision on May 31, to temporarily halt the revocation of visas for foreign students, the June 4, decision to temporarily block Trump's executive order, and Harvard's lawsuit regarding the suspension of federal grants demonstrate that the judicial branch serves as a restraint and counterbalance on the executive branch.

On the other hand, federal government decisions, whether it be suspending state grants or attempting to ban the admission of foreign students, pose a significant threat to academic freedom and increase the risk of radicalizing the university. If the Trump administration's goal is to bring about genuine transformation at Harvard, it is unlikely that its hard-line policies will succeed with the oldest and wealthiest university in the U.S.. However, there is no doubt that these actions will have a chilling effect on the future decisions of other universities. While Harvard might resist institutional changes despite the federal pressure, Dartmouth or MIT may choose a more cautious approach.

Summary

The dispute between the Trump administration and Harvard University is multifaceted: while Harvard's criticism may be legitimate, many believe the methods of intervention are disproportionate, threatening academic freedom and increasing the likelihood of further politicization of the university. It is also important to consider that time is working against Harvard, federal funding constitutes about 11% of the university's operating revenue, making it unlikely that the university will be able to mobilize sufficient unrestricted funds for resuming suspended research or diversify its funding sources in the near future. In this context, the democratic and free judicial system gains even greater significance, as it ensures the rule of law and provides a platform where both sides can confront each other on equal terms to defend their interests.