

Trump attacks on law firms begin to chill pro bono work on causes he doesn't like



Since [late February](#), President Trump has used [the power of the presidency to punish law firms](#) that he accuses of weaponizing the justice system and undermining the national interest, part of his promised campaign of vengeance against his perceived political enemies.

Trump's use of executive orders against specific law firms is widely seen as an effort to intimidate and punish them for representing people or causes at odds with his administration. Many of the firms also were once home to lawyers who were involved in investigations of Trump himself, [such as former special counsel Robert Mueller](#), who led the probe into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

Some law firms targeted by Trump have fought back. Others have cut a deal with him.

While the legal battle over this controversial use of presidential power is still playing out in the courts, ripple effects already are being felt beyond the boardrooms of the country's most powerful law firms.

"I've never seen an administration target firms for their case selection, the clients they select. It really does set a very dangerous precedent of political interference in the legal profession," said Lourdes Rosado, the president and general counsel of LatinoJustice PRLDEF, a New York-based civil rights nonprofit.

"The administration's attacks on big law firms really create a climate of fear that could deter firms from taking on these very politically sensitive, yes, pro bono cases that are challenging unconstitutional

actions right now."

There's concern over law firms curtailing pro bono work for causes that are unpopular with Trump

More than 180 lawsuits have been filed in federal court so far challenging Trump administration policies, according to [a count kept by Just Security](#) based at the New York University School of Law. Those cases have frustrated the president and slowed his agenda.

In many of those lawsuits, major law firms are working alongside advocacy groups like Rosado's, adding resources and legal firepower. That pro bono assistance varies from case to case, but it can include things like providing attorneys to conduct legal research or help build a case theory, or financial support to help pay for travel, experts and court costs.

NPR spoke with attorneys at a half-dozen organizations that regularly team up with big law firms that provide pro bono assistance to challenge government actions or policies. All of them say they have deep concerns that Trump's campaign against law firms will cause firms to pull back from pro bono work that is at odds with Trump's own views.

Some of them say it's already happening.

"Increasingly, I'm hearing about political considerations being an issue in firms deciding whether they're going to be able to assist," said Dustin Rynders, the legal director of the Texas Civil Rights Project.

"I have been turned down on some recent requests where people have expressed concern about political ramifications, about being involved in immigrant rights work in this time, about being involved in civil rights, voting rights cases, in challenges against the administration," he said.

For organizations like his, Rynders says, that pro bono work is vital.

"Without the assistance of those extra attorneys, those extra minds, those extra resources, we're able to bring fewer cases, and we're able to put less resources in the cases we bring, which can also impact your ultimate likelihood of success," he said.

An attorney at another organization said that law firms they have teamed up with on a pro bono basis in the past have recently declined to work with them. The attorney, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the matter, said the firms provided no reason for their decision.

Law

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If law firms pull back on pro bono work, there likely will be fewer challenges to potentially unconstitutional actions by the government down the road. And if that happens, it's not one case or one cause that suffers, said Jennifer Levi, the senior director of transgender and queer rights at GLAD Law.

"This isn't just about progressive causes or any particular political stance," Levi said. "This is ultimately about whether the legal system can function the way that it's supposed to."

Levi takes heart from that fact that some law firms are fighting back. Four firms targeted by Trump have sued in federal court. Judges who have reviewed the cases have already temporarily blocked enforcement of the executive orders' punitive measures.

If the legal profession doesn't push back now, Levi said, the whole idea of equal justice and the justice system is vulnerable.

"I don't think that's ultimately something that the legal profession can compromise on," Levi said.