

INSIDER INSIGHTS

What a Divided Washington Won't Change

A new Congress will bring hearings, letters, and headlines. But most of the federal government's work sits outside the political pendulum, and the brands that know the difference will be the ones ready to seize it.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democrats have taken Congress, and a lot of companies are nervous, including those who did nothing more than take legitimate work with the federal government or receive legitimate grants. Subpoenas may be coming for their executives, putting them next to those who unethically or illegally manipulated the system. Members of Congress, the news media, and social media influencers will be ready to tie them all to the tracks.

And that may not be the worst part. Doing business with the Trump administration today might get companies pilloried tomorrow, but any move to accommodate the new normal in Congress could mean broken contracts and denied grants from the administration.

It will be important to assess where the true vulnerabilities lie, which is why our last two Insider Insights reports showed how government affairs and communications teams can partner to navigate the tension of Washington politics. This report examines the silver lining: how bureaucratic inertia will keep most of the business of government moving, and the critical role corporate communications has in helping brands seize opportunities instead of getting stuck in fear.

THE PROBLEM

Many stakeholders will say change everything

After an election like this one, it's natural to hear calls from the boardroom, the C-suite, or major stakeholders to change everything. Headlines will predict upheaval. Boards will ask what the company is doing about the new majority, while employees are buzzing on social media and intranets. Meanwhile, activists and elected officials on both sides will demand that companies pick a position, drop a partner, or rethink a program.

We have seen this after each of the last several elections. But despite the attention political appointees and new policies secure in tumultuous times, most of the federal government's work sits outside the political pendulum. The Patent and Trademark Office will still review, approve, and deny tens of thousands of trademarks annually. Companies will still need to test, report, and test again before the Food and Drug Administration approves drugs. And as Politico reported this year, the Pentagon's 2027 budget request came in at $1.5 trillion, creating new opportunities, from weapons and vehicle manufacturing to IT infrastructure, across one of the federal government's largest agencies.[1]

1 Politico, "Trump calls for record $1.5 trillion defense budget, a 50 percent jump," January 2026. missiledefenseadvocacy.org/other-news/trump-calls-for-record-1-5-trillion-defense-budget-a-50-percent-jump

CASE STUDY

Even DOGE couldn't stop the business of government

The Department of Government Efficiency originally set out to cut $2 trillion in federal spending. That goal shrank to $1 trillion, then to $150 billion.[2] The shrinking goals did not soften the impact on agencies like USAID and the Department of Education, which lost more than 95 percent and nearly half of their workforces, respectively.[3,4]

However, despite a 9 percent reduction in the federal workforce, which the libertarian Cato Institute calls the largest peacetime cut on record, federal outlays still rose to roughly $7.6 trillion in 2025.[5] And across agencies, the business of government kept moving. Patent grants from the Patent and Trademark Office were virtually unchanged from the prior year.[6] The Federal Trade Commission and Department of Justice reviewed 2,006 merger filings and took 18 enforcement actions in fiscal year 2025.[7] And government-wide contract spending rose to about $793 billion, up $17.8 billion from 2024 after adjusting for inflation.[8]

$7.6T

Federal Outlays, FY2025

Despite the largest peacetime workforce cut on record — a 9 percent reduction — total federal spending still rose.

Even nonprofits, which saw direct federal grants fall by nearly 38 percent according to one analysis, still received $21.4 billion between February and September 2025.[9]

In short, the business of government continued despite historic cuts to the federal workforce. That means the business of business can continue, too. That's why even though the Pentagon plans to trim the number of transfers and similar moves servicemembers make each year, they still number in the hundreds of thousands, and that is work government contractors will keep doing.

2 Fortune, "Elon Musk drastically drops DOGE's savings goal from $2 trillion to $150 billion for the year," April 11, 2025. fortune.com/2025/04/11/elon-musk-drastically-drops-doge-savings-goal-2-trillion-150-billion-year

3 Devex Newswire, "Trump gets rid of over 95% of USAID staff," February 7, 2025. devex.com/news/devex-newswire-trump-gets-rid-of-over-95-of-usaid-staff-109307

4 Truthout, "Ed Secretary Says Cutting Nearly Half of Staff First Step to Dismantling Dept," March 2025. truthout.org/articles/ed-secretary-says-cutting-nearly-half-of-staff-first-step-to-dismantling-dept

5 Cato Institute, "DOGE Produced the Largest Peacetime Workforce Cut on Record. Spending Kept Rising," December 17, 2025. cato.org/blog/doge-produced-largest-peacetime-workforce-cut-record-spending-kept-rising-0

6 Patently-O, "The Surprising Headline of 2025: USPTO Stability?," December 2025. patentlyo.com/patent/2025/12/surprising-headline-stability.html

7 Federal Trade Commission & U.S. Department of Justice, "FY 2025 Hart-Scott-Rodino Annual Report to Congress," July 2026. ftc.gov/news-events/news/press-releases/2026/07/ftc-doj-issue-fiscal-year-2025-hart-scott-rodino-annual-report

8 U.S. Government Accountability Office, "Snapshot: Government-Wide Contracting in FY 2025," interactive dashboard. gao.gov/blog/snapshot-government-wide-contracting-fy-2025-interactive-dashboard

9 The Chronicle of Philanthropy, "Federal Grants to Everyday Charities Fell 38% in Trump's First Months," 2025. philanthropy.com/news/federal-grants-to-everyday-charities-fell-38-in-trumps-first-months

THE SOLUTION

Speak smart so value crowds out controversy

Two months from now, the new Congress will officially start. Between now and then, companies need to dial in on how to speak smart so that by the time their brand is caught in the politics, what's front and center for the media and core stakeholders is value, not controversy.

FOUR WAYS TO SPEAK SMART

Go local. Regional outlets care far more about the jobs you'll add, the new office you're building, and the people you're helping than national politics.

Target mid-tier trades. Top trade publications often want political insight. Mid-tier ones prioritize expertise and practical takeaways for their readers.

Use the news as a hook, then bridge. Mention the political relevance in the first paragraph, then pivot to your story, business, nonprofit, or personal, by the second.

Control the format. Op-eds and short statements keep every word in your voice and avoid interview fumbles.

1 BUILD THE CALENDAR AROUND WHAT DOESN'T CHANGE

Every month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture releases its estimate of food prices based on the broader Consumer Price Index. It happens in the last week of the month, just like clockwork, which is how we helped an import company secure key trade press not on the politics of food prices, but rather the simple economics of consumer affordability.

This is an old principle but one that is often forgotten during times of tension, such as when a new election might bring unfavorable scrutiny. By sticking to what is certain, communicators are able to keep the drumbeat going, whether it's showing buyers and investors that the Food and Drug Administration approved the drug on schedule, announcing solid earnings every quarter, or putting out the press release about a new contract or grant.

While the competition is panicking, you'll be staying top of mind with current and future stakeholders.

2 SPEAK SMART WHILE COMPETITORS RUN SILENT

Many executives will want to proactively fight Congress. If you're Jeff Bezos, you can do that. Most can't, so many will run silent. Neither extreme works: fighting Congress makes you into exactly the kind of headline you're trying to avoid, and silence means your competitors are soaking up the empty space in the marketplace of ideas.

Speaking smart means staying out of the political fight while staying on the parts of the field that matter most to your brand.

The bonus is that your brand will get LLM attention that will help bury the political controversies. Read more in our PR Daily guide, *How to get clients in the press without talking about Trump.*[10]

10 PR Daily, "How to get clients in the press without talking about Trump." prdaily.com/how-to-get-clients-in-the-press-without-talking-about-trump

3 SQUEEZE ALL THE VALUE OUT OF EARNED MEDIA

When your organization has earned the media placement, make sure the rest of the company is aware and has a plan to use it. Marketing amplifies it on social media and the company website, sales shares it with prospects, investor relations points to it with shareholders, and government affairs brings it to the officials it briefs. Your team has two months to increase the quality and quantity of earned media as well as how well it's used across the entire organization.

Former FBI hostage negotiator Chris Voss wrote in Never Split the Difference, "When the pressure is on, you don't rise to the occasion; you fall to your highest level of preparation."

CHRIS VOSS, NEVER SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE

THE BOTTOM LINE

A divided Washington will produce hearings, letters, and headlines, and companies should be ready for them. But even DOGE couldn't stop the business of government from mostly working, and neither will an election. Be prepared for what's going to change, and the opportunities in what won't. ■

PROVEN MEDIA SOLUTIONS

Proven Media Solutions is a public relations and public affairs firm.