


ASTRONAUTS FOR AMERICA

POWER OF THE PURSE VS EXECUTIVE CONTROL
Founding Value: Separation of Powers. Institutional Norms: Executive Constraint; Truth, Science & Evidence

BOTTOM LINE

The ongoing battle over presidential "impoundment"—seen when the executive branch freezes congressionally approved funds for research, schools, or disaster relief—directly violates Congress's constitutional authority over federal spending. While presidents have withheld money for practical cost savings, freezing funds over political differences breaks the budget process and threatens local communities reliant on emergency aid. To stop these unlawful freezes, citizens should contact their congressional representatives to demand rigorous oversight hearings and support bipartisan legislation that strictly enforces the Impoundment Control Act.

NARRATIVE

The disputes over withholding congressionally appropriated funds are an ongoing constitutional struggle between Congress's authority to decide how federal money is spent and the president's authority to execute and manage federal programs. The basic issue is, after a spending bill becomes law, whether the president can refuse to spend funds as directed by that law. If presidents do that, budget negotiations in Congress become impossible, as even if Congress agrees on how to spend money, nobody has any guarantee that the money will be spent as Congress directed.

Our Constitution gives Congress the authority to appropriate federal funds through its "power of the purse" (Article I). Historically, presidents have occasionally declined to spend all appropriated funds, a practice known as "[impoundment](#)." Early impoundments were generally limited and justified by practical reasons such as projects became unnecessary, lower-than-expected costs and/or some change in circumstances. The use of impoundment significantly increased in the early 70s, causing Congress to pass the [Impoundment Control Act of 1974](#) which sharply limits unilateral executive impoundment to reaffirm their control over appropriated funds.

Further escalation occurred in January 2025, as the current administration through the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), attempted and, in some cases, succeeded in freezing or withholding billions of dollars in federal funds already allocated by Congress for various programs. This included decisions to withhold or cancel funding for federal agencies, scientific research approved through long-standing processes applied by NSF and NIH, education, and state disaster relief assistance. These actions intensified concerns over executive encroachment on Congress's constitutional power of the purse. Delays or suspensions of federal grants have affected research, education, and innovation. Communities have experienced [disruption in disaster recovery efforts](#). In California, disaster relief restrictions may hinder emergency response after events like wildfires and floods. [Courts and oversight agencies](#) continue to review and question such practices with the prevailing legal view holding that the executive branch cannot unilaterally withhold congressionally appropriated funds based on ideological or political conditions.

FINDINGS

PROXIMATE CAUSE(S)	CONTRIBUTING CAUSE(S)	ROOT CAUSE(S)
- Increasingly aggressive use of impoundment such as attempts to freeze or withhold billions of dollars in congressionally allocated funds. - Specific threats have included congressionally approved federal funding for disaster relief, education grants for universities, money for federal agencies and education.	- Increasing political polarization - Congress's repeated inability to pass the 12 annual appropriations bills or a full federal budget on time, forcing reliance on temporary funding measures - The rise of the unitary executive theory, a constitutional interpretation holding that Article II of the U.S. Constitution vests all executive power in the president	- Long-term expansion of executive power beyond the limits defined in our Constitution, - Lack of action by Congress to act to protect their constitutional powers, putting party over constitutional responsibility, - The ongoing constitutional struggle between Congress's authority to decide how federal money is spent and the president's authority to execute and manage federal programs. - Lack of evidence-based decision making, such as withholding or canceling funding for agencies or for science research without regard to data.

Norm Erosion: *Beyond the limits defined in our Constitution, our traditional norms are critical to our guardrails of democracy. Executive Constraint: the norm that presidents respect the limits of their office is violated when the executive branch overreaches to control billions of dollars of federal funding allocated by Congress. This undermines the basic principles of democracy, including separation of powers. Truth, Science, and Evidence: Cancelling or delaying of federally approved funds without regard to data or evidence impacts scientific research, education, disaster relief, infrastructure and the economy. Interruptions create immediate and long-term harm.*

RECOMMENDATIONS		
LEGISLATORS AND JURISTS	GOVERNMENT EXECUTIVES	CITIZENS
- Modernize and strengthen the Impoundment Control Act - Improve oversight and ensure appropriations laws are clear and enforceable. Lawmakers can require agencies and the Office of Management and Budget to publicly report funding delays, rescissions, or pauses. - Reinforce legal safeguards and oversight mechanisms to ensure appropriated funds are spent as Congress intended. Congress or state governments can challenge unlawful impoundment in court to compel the release of funds and reinforce congressional authority. - Build Bipartisan Coalitions-legislators from both parties can work together to protect Congress’s spending authority regardless of which party controls the White House.	- Ensure federal funds are managed responsibly while maintaining respect for Congress’s constitutional authority over spending. - Prioritize transparency - Follow legal procedures - Work collaboratively with Congress when concerns about spending arise. - Heads of agencies can use real-world examples to communicate how funding is used, share measurable data, and convey risks of underfunding.	- Citizens play a vital role in ensuring government accountability and protecting the constitutional separation of power. Just as everyone aboard a spaceship has a stake in its safe operation, every citizen and institution has a role in protecting democracy and the common good. - Stay informed about how federal funds are appropriated and spent - Contact elected officials and voice concerns about violation of norms and constitutional principles - Attend public meetings - Keep informed on issues and vote in every election. - Talk to neighbors about differences. Conversations humanize disagreement and create space for empathy, trust, and shared understanding. As Abraham Lincoln reminded Americans “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” - Visit AstronautsForAmerica.org for the AFA Candidate Integrity Pledge. - Challenge your local school board to improve civics education at all levels.

***Key Sources:** *Government Accountability Office (GAO): Impoundment Control Act Overview; Bipartisan Policy Center: Budget Impoundment 101; Brennancenter.org: Federal funding freeze analysis, analysis of executive power and separation of powers, institutional disfunction; Federal News Network: GAO Spending Law Violation Report; Steve Vladeck: The Impoundment Crisis of 2025; Governing for Impact: Challenging Unlawful Impoundments; Harvard CHLPI: Litigation Challenging Trump’s Funding Freeze; Protect Democracy: The Impoundment Threat Explained, 2025 Federal Grant Pause Overview; National Institute of Health; National Science Foundation; The Conference Board: Administration’s View on Impoundment; High Noon for the Separation of Powers: Trump and the Impoundment Control Act, Philip Joyce, 10 Oct 2025, Wiley online.*

Appeal to Our Crewmates: This “Failure Is Not an Option” briefing is one of a series by Astronauts For America, distilling our “America, We Have a Problem!” series briefings into cause factors and actionable recommendations. We are not constitutional scholars; we defer to experts and use primary sources: court decisions, congressional records, peer-reviewed scholarship, and non-partisan press. Please use the “Contact Us” feature on our website to tell us what we can do to help our democracy keep faith with our American ideals.