

Why does EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt still have a job? He’s defiantly loyal to Donald Trump and effectively pushes his agenda.



More than twenty Cabinet officers and high-level White House staffers have either resigned or have been fired from Donald Trump’s administration in less than 18-months. So why does the scandal-plagued Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, Scott Pruitt, still have a job? [Christa Slaton](#) writes that much of Pruitt’s durability is down to his Trumpian attitude towards his critics, denouncing attacks on him as “lies and half-truths”, his loyalty to Trump, and his effectiveness at rolling back EPA regulations.

How has Environmental Protection Agency Administrator (EPA) Scott Pruitt managed to retain his job in the midst of a series of [investigations](#) into allegations that he has violated several laws, engaged in numerous acts of conflicts of interest, and squandered taxpayer money for his lavish lifestyle? Although most of these investigations are ongoing, the Government Accountability Office has already determined the EPA violated federal appropriations law and the Antideficiency Act by spending \$43,000 to [install](#) a secure phone booth in Pruitt’s personal office.

While more than twenty Cabinet officers and high level White House staffers [resigned or were fired](#) within fifteen months of President Trump’s inauguration, Pruitt has survived, in spite of a series of scandals. These [include](#): his luxury travel; his use of round-the-clock security with as many as 20 persons to protect him on trips to the Rose Bowl and Disneyland; his potential overbilling for security guards; his \$50 per night bedroom rental in a Capitol Hill Condo from a Washington lobbyist; excessive pay raises to his political appointees; potential lobbying violations; and his efforts to obtain employment for his wife by allegedly having EPA staffers contact donors to help her find a job and by also contacting the chief executive of [Chick-fil-A](#) to seek a franchise for her.

The cost to US taxpayers from these actions has been astounding. The 24-hour security costs for Pruitt alone have cost taxpayers more than \$3 million. Pruitt’s staff [rationalizes](#) these as necessary expenses due to the threats on his life. The cost of his first-class travel in his first year in office was over \$100,000 and was also justified on the basis of security. Yet, security assessments within the EPA have [not found evidence](#) of specific, credible physical threats against Pruitt’s life.

It is not surprising that someone who violates federal rules to construct a soundproof booth in his office would want to keep secrets and would abhor transparency. According to Pruitt’s former deputy chief of staff, Kevin Chmielewski, Pruitt took extreme measures to silence and punish anyone who questioned Pruitt or his actions. Chmielewski was a staunch supporter and former campaign aide to Donald Trump. Yet, when he refused to retroactively approve an EPA staff member’s first-class travel from Morocco to the United States, Pruitt [placed him](#) on administrative leave.

After Chmielewski learned from news reports that he had been fired, he turned whistleblower and met with Congressional Democrats. Chmielewski presented them with a detailed list of Pruitt’s actions which he deemed arguably unethical. He also described the manner in which Pruitt retaliated against anyone who advised him not to take the actions they considered unethical or illegal. These suspect actions against employees included marginalization, demotion, administrative leave, and firing.

Five members of Congress sent Pruitt a [letter](#) on April 12, 2018 detailing their concerns about his “Wasteful Spending, Unethical Behavior, and Inappropriate Use of Resources and Personnel.” In seeking to confirm Chmielewski’s claims, they requested copies of specific documents and forms of communication on each incident raised by Chmielewski, which were later addressed in Pruitt’s Congressional testimony.



"Stop Pruitt, Rally To Oppose EPA Nominee Scott Pruitt" by Lorie Shaul is licensed under CC BY SA 2.0

Why Pruitt can get away with it

Machiavelli [argued](#) "it is much safer to be feared than loved." This is an attitude Pruitt shares with Trump. Dissenters will be banished and rulers will be swift in their retaliation. Personal loyalty trumps policy agreement. The ends justify the means.

Pruitt has weathered each storm of controversy. He has done so defiantly and unrepentantly. This is precisely the style exhibited by the Machiavellian Trump who has expressed his admiration for strong leaders and his disdain for "weak" ones. Noah Bierman and Eli Stokols have [argued](#) convincingly that Trump respects autocrats. Not only during his recent grilling interrogation before Congress did Pruitt forcefully denounce the accusations against him [as lies and half-truths](#), but he claimed that the "attacks" on him were really attacks on the Trump administration's agenda.

Champion boxer, Jack Dempsey, known for his aggressive boxing style, stated: "[The best defense is a good offense.](#)" Rather than crumbling and apologizing before his harsh critics, Pruitt took on the role of defending the president and his agenda. It was no longer about answering for his actions, it was about demonstrating his loyalty to Trump and delivering on the promises Trump made in the presidential campaign. The Trump agenda was his shield. Meeting with reporters on June 15, 2018, Trump acknowledged he was not happy with some of Pruitt's actions, but also [expressed](#): "He's done a fantastic job running the EPA, which is very overriding."

Pruitt has been among Trump's most loyal appointees—never questioning him and never speaking ill of him. The *Washington Post's* John Dawsey, Juliet Eilperin, and Brady Dennis interviewed nearly a dozen current and former members of the administration regarding the relationship between Pruitt and Trump. They [report](#) that Pruitt is a genuine admirer of Trump. One former administration official they interviewed recalled Pruitt stating: "The president's instincts are completely right."

There is complete congruence in their thinking about the environment, global warming, and rollbacks on environmental regulations. While former White House National Council Chair Gary Cohn and former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were advising the president that Pruitt was giving him inaccurate data to justify pulling out of the Paris Climate Accord, Pruitt's views prevailed. Pruitt is credited with [coining](#) Trump's phrase: "I was elected to represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not Paris."

Many who have departed the Trump administration were defiant to their critics until the end of their tenure and several have remained fiercely loyal to the president. What makes Pruitt's longevity and influence different? He delivers. In addition to his unblinking loyalty, Pruitt's accomplishments are not just accomplishing Trump's agenda; they are fulfilling the Republican Party agenda and earning him accolades among billionaires who are benefitting from the rollback of EPA regulations. [According](#) to the Environmental Protection Agency website, in Pruitt's first year as EPA Chief, the "EPA finalized 22 deregulatory actions, which could save Americans more than \$1 billion in regulatory costs."

Amy Thomson and Rebecca Leber of *Mother Jones*, a progressive, reader-supported investigative magazine, have [documented](#) some of the changes Pruitt has made to EPA regulations during his tenure. These include rollback of the Obama administration's Clean Power Plan to limit carbon pollution from power plants; reduction of regulations on water pollution; reversal of a 25-year old policy that imposed limits on nearly 200 pollutants, including arsenic, lead, and mercury, from major industrial polluters. He has delayed implementation of other Obama-era rules such as, tougher fuel standards for auto-makers and more limits on ozone pollution. Actions taken against companies for violations of EPA rules have dramatically [declined](#) under the Trump administration. More than 700 EPA employees have [left the agency](#), including 200 scientists.

After several members of Congress called for Pruitt's resignation in early April, several right-wing advocacy groups came to his defense. *Bloomberg* [reports](#) that FreedomWorks sent out a call to its 5.7 million conservative supporters to remind them of Pruitt's success on rolling back regulations. While the investigations continue and the number of Pruitt critics grows, the political right has largely stood behind Pruitt, as they have stood with Trump.

One can never be too assured of Trump's loyalty. Pruitt, however, has accomplished what Trump promised his supporters and he has done it with the defiance that Trump exhibits along with demonstrating the personal loyalty that Trump demands.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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About the author



Christa Slaton – *New Mexico State University*

Christa Slaton is a Professor of Government, at New Mexico State University. Her research interests have focused on the means to advance and enhance democracy; building trust and creating greater transparency in governance; promoting ethics in leadership; improving election administration; and creating collaborations between universities and communities. She began her academic career as the co-designer of a method of public opinion polling—Televote— that was developed to educate citizens on complex issues, foster dialogue, and obtain responses to questions after deliberation.