

ARTISTIC  
FREEDOM  
INITIATIVE

# Artistic Freedom Monitor

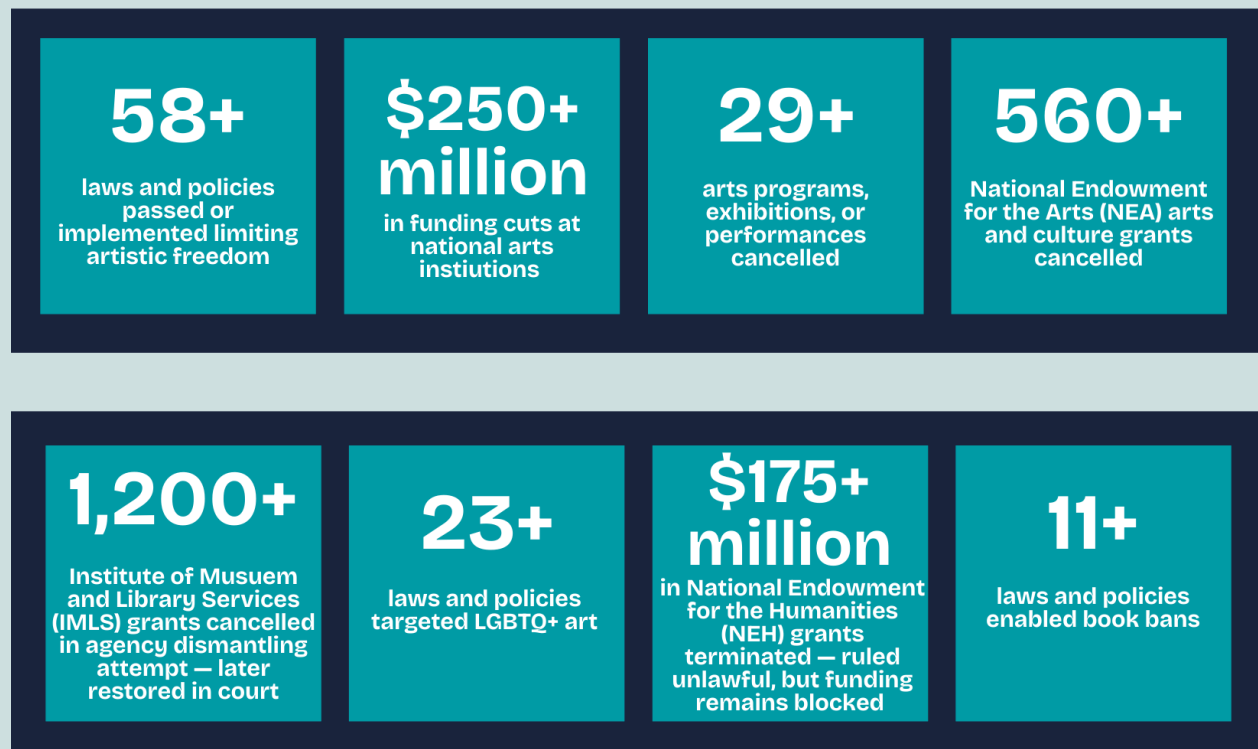
United States

January 1 - December 31, 2025

# ARTISTIC FREEDOM MONITOR: AT A GLANCE

January 1-December 31, 2025

## KEY FINDINGS



### I. What is the Artistic Freedom Monitor (AFM)?

Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) created the AFM as a first-of-its-kind tracking and accountability initiative documenting government actions that threaten artistic freedom and the independence of cultural institutions in the United States. The Monitor is a tool to ensure transparency and accountability in this sector and will consist of three main components: 1) data and information tracking; 2) spotlight reporting and analyses; and 3) strategic action, including litigation. To date, the Monitor has examined systemic government measures—including laws, policies, executive actions, funding decisions, and administrative measures—that restrict how art is produced, funded, and accessed, or that impede the independence of

cultural institutions. AFM will expand coverage on the impacts of such policies across the cultural sector throughout 2026.

**Why now?** AFI has developed specialized expertise in tracing governmental interference in cultural institutions building upon its extensive reporting of state interference in the arts and cultural sector by illiberal governments and backsliding democracies, including [Hungary](#), [Poland](#), and [Slovakia](#). Our findings suggest that modern restrictions on culture and artistic expression are often imposed indirectly through opaque bureaucratic mechanisms, including administrative controls on artistic content and expression, funding restrictions, interference in the governance of cultural institutions, and immigration policies affecting foreign artists. These actions create a subsequent chilling effect and enable political influence over cultural institutions.

In the past year, AFI has observed parallel trends in the United States; U.S. Government actions indicated an effort to narrow free expression, reshape public memory, and weaken the independence of arts and cultural institutions. In response, AFI—together with our partners **Democracy Forward**, **Human Rights First**, and the pro bono programs of **Stanford Law School** and **UC Berkeley School of Law**—is committed to monitoring and reporting on these developments and pursuing strategic responses to advance government accountability and protect artists, arts organizations, and the freedom to create.



Members of the International Pride Orchestra perform at the Music Center at Strathmore in Maryland in June 2025 after their scheduled Pride Month performance at the Kennedy Center was canceled. *Photo: REUTERS/ Nathan Howard.*

## II. Methodology

The Artistic Freedom Monitor relies on a diverse set of credible academic, NGO, UN, and press reporting to track government actions that threaten artistic freedom in the United States. AFI classifies laws and policies as threats if they result in one or more of the following outcomes:

- 1. Politicized Funding of the Arts:** Impose ideological conditions on public arts funding, including through funding cuts and freezes.;
- 2. Censorship and Restricting Artistic Content:**
  - a. Limit or prohibit the creation, presentation, or dissemination of particular artistic genres, themes, or practices.
  - b. Remove, censor, or suppress works of art or cultural programming for political reasons.
  - c. Restrict access to, or undermine the integrity of, cultural heritage sites, cultural archives, or arts education material.;
- 3. Governance Changes and Administrative Capture:** Assert government control over curatorial, leadership, or governance decisions at cultural institutions;
- 4. Immigration Restrictions Affecting Arts Programming:** Limit the ability of foreign artists and cultural workers to engage in cross-border cultural exchange and other mobility constraints that limit participation in arts programming in the U.S.

## III. Key Findings

### *Categories of Actions, Laws, and Policies Restricting Artistic Freedom*

In 2025, federal and state governments employed executive actions, laws, and policies that restricted artistic freedom across four distinct categories, raising First Amendment and non-discrimination concerns: **(1) politicized funding; (2) censorship and content-based restrictions; (3) interference in governance and administrative control of arts institutions; and (4) immigration and mobility restrictions for artists.** AFI selected illustrative examples within each category, focusing on measures that combined punitive enforcement, viewpoint-based constraints, structural defunding, and/or broad chilling effects.

While some measures have been challenged in court by civil society organizations, law firms, and institutions, they have already prompted cultural institutions and artists to self-censor for fear of funding loss or further intervention.

## 1. Politicized Federal Funding Certifications and Eligibility Rules for the Arts/Culture

A defining trend in 2025 was the politicization of public arts funding through new federal grant certifications and eligibility rules requiring institutions and artists to affirm compliance with political or ideological standards.<sup>1</sup> Funding leverage is a key enabling mechanism of artistic suppression, as it allows government actors to reshape programming and institutional behavior without formally censoring speech, producing broad chilling effects across the cultural sector and laying the groundwork for downstream content constraints. These measures can be implemented quickly, often with limited transparency or public accountability.

**AFI documented more than \$250 million in confirmed funding cuts, with total losses likely far higher:**

1. **The National Endowment for the Humanities** terminated approximately 1,400 grants totaling \$175 million—this measure has been blocked by federal judges, but litigation is ongoing.<sup>2</sup> The grants are frozen pending a final court decision.
2. **The National Endowment for the Arts** rescinded at least 564 grants totaling \$27 million, many tied to executive directives opposing so-called “gender ideology.”<sup>3</sup>
3. **Following EO 14238, “Continuing the Reduction of Federal Bureaucracy,”**<sup>4</sup> the administration canceled approximately 1,200 competitive Institute of Museum and Library Services grants as part of an effort to dismantle the agency.<sup>5</sup> After a federal court ruling blocking the executive action later that year, all previously canceled grants were reinstated.<sup>6</sup>
4. **Educational Programs and Fellowships Eliminated** included the termination of NEA Creative Writing Fellowships,<sup>7</sup> and the 2025 Challenge America program.<sup>8</sup>

## **Public Media Defunding**

In 2025, federal actions targeted public media funding as a mechanism to weaken independent cultural journalism and arts programming perceived as politically

misaligned. Rather than regulating content directly, these measures operated through the withdrawal of public subsidies and structural dismantling of funding bodies, threatening the financial viability of public broadcasting institutions and narrowing the space for arts, music, documentary, and educational programming that serve broad and diverse audiences.

- **Public Broadcasting Cuts:** Executive Order 14290, “Ending Taxpayer Subsidization of Biased Media” (May 2025),<sup>9</sup> directed the CPB to cease public media funding, including NPR and PBS, imperiling arts programming, cultural journalism, and documentary production nationwide. Congress subsequently passed the Rescissions Act of 2025,<sup>10</sup> eliminating nearly \$1.1 billion in CPB funding. Deprived of federal support, CPB’s board voted to shut down,<sup>11</sup> placing the future of public radio—and the arts, music, and documentary programming it supports—at serious risk.



Protestors participate in a rally outside NPR headquarters in Washington, D.C. in March 2025, calling on Congress to protect funding for public broadcasters, PBS and NPR. *Photo: Saul Loeb/AFP/Getty Images*

## **2. Censorship and Restricting Artistic Content**

In 2025, AFM documented **29 specific programs, exhibitions, and performances** that were **canceled, removed, or censored** across major institutions as a direct

result of government action. These interventions spanned **museums, national parks, libraries, universities, and performing arts venues** nationwide. AFM's tracking suggests that these outcomes were frequently enabled by identifiable policy mechanisms that allowed government actors to shape cultural expression indirectly, through law, funding, administrative directives, and institutional governance.

## Obscenity and 'Harmful to Minors' Frameworks

A key state-level mechanism in 2025 was reliance on broadly defined obscenity standards and revisions to 'harmful to minor' statutes<sup>12</sup> to justify book bans, the removal of artworks, and the criminalization of educators, librarians, and cultural workers.<sup>13</sup> These measures disproportionately affected artistic works addressing sexuality, gender identity, race, inequality, and mental health, and they heightened legal exposure for educators, librarians, and cultural workers. By introducing or expanding criminal penalties in this space, states transformed what were once policy disputes into matters of personal legal jeopardy, intensifying chilling effects across cultural and educational settings.

In 2025, **11 laws and policy measures** across more than **eight states** facilitated or accelerated book challenges and removals, and PEN America documented **more than 6,780** unique titles reported banned that year.<sup>14</sup> Many of the most frequently targeted works included award-winning titles such as *The Handmaid's Tale* (Margaret Atwood), *The Bluest Eye* (Toni Morrison), and *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Stephen Chbosky). These laws often expanded parental authority to challenge titles—particularly those featuring LGBTQ+ characters or addressing gender, sexuality, race, racism, or mental health—under the rubric of “age appropriateness” or “obscenity.” Examples include:

- **Texas Senate Bill 412<sup>15</sup>** removed a longstanding affirmative-defense provision in the Texas Penal Code that had protected educators, librarians, and others who provided certain materials to minors for educational purposes, narrowing that defense to only law-enforcement and judicial officers. By eliminating this exemption, SB 412 increases the potential for criminal exposure related to distributing “harmful material” and may lead to preemptive censorship in libraries, schools, and arts education programs.
- **The Tennessee Secretary of State introduced an age-appropriateness review policy<sup>16</sup>** to all Tennessee public libraries mandating them to conduct an “immediate review” of children and young adult reading materials within 60 days, threatening a denial of state and federal funding for

non-compliance. This forced libraries statewide to review and remove controversial books under threat of financial penalty.

## Political Narrative Controls

Federal executive actions and agency guidance increasingly conditioned funding eligibility, institutional oversight,<sup>17</sup> and visa eligibility<sup>18</sup> on adherence to prescribed political narratives. These measures discouraged work that critiques U.S. history, government policy, or dominant cultural norms, and they created conditions for indirect censorship through institutional risk-management.

Examples:

- **Executive Order 14168, “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government” (January 2025)**<sup>19</sup> directed national federal agencies to implement policies limiting funding for “gender ideology.” In response to the directive, the National Endowment for the Arts added a grant certification clause barring support for work deemed to promote “gender ideology,” placing LGBTQ+ and gender-focused artistic work at risk and contributing to a chilling effect that led some artists and organizations to self-censor. Four arts groups—National Queer Theater, Rhode Island Latino Arts, The Theater Offensive, and Theater Communications Group—successfully challenged the NEA’s certification requirement in court with support from the ACLU, and a federal judge ordered it suspended on First Amendment grounds. However, the decision is still pending appeal, generating uncertainty and heightened pressure on artists whose work explores gender and sexuality.<sup>20</sup>
- **Executive Order 14253, “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” (March 2025)**<sup>21</sup> directed federal agencies and cultural institutions—including the Smithsonian Institution and the National Park Service—to remove content characterized by the administration as “divisive,” “anti-American,” or “improper” and tied funding and appropriations to compliance with a narrowly defined historical narrative. This has raised serious concerns about censorship, the suppression of inclusive or critical historical perspectives (including on race and gender), and political interference in curatorial and educational decisions, prompting pushback from historians, cultural leaders, and public advocates who argue it threatens artistic freedom, academic freedom, and the integrity of historical records.<sup>22</sup>

- **Exhibitions and Displays Removed at National Parks and Cultural Heritage Site Removed** as a result of these new policies, including the removal of *The Scourged Back* exhibit at Fort Pulaski National Monument;<sup>23</sup> the erasure of historical information about slavery and Indigenous resistance at multiple National Park Service sites;<sup>24</sup> climate change signage at Acadia National Park;<sup>25</sup> and Indigenous history displays at Muir Woods<sup>26</sup> and Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge.<sup>27</sup> LGBTQ+ history was also directly targeted, including directives to remove references to “transgender,” “queer,”<sup>28</sup> Marsha P. Johnson, and Sylvia Rivera<sup>29</sup> from the Stonewall National Monument website.



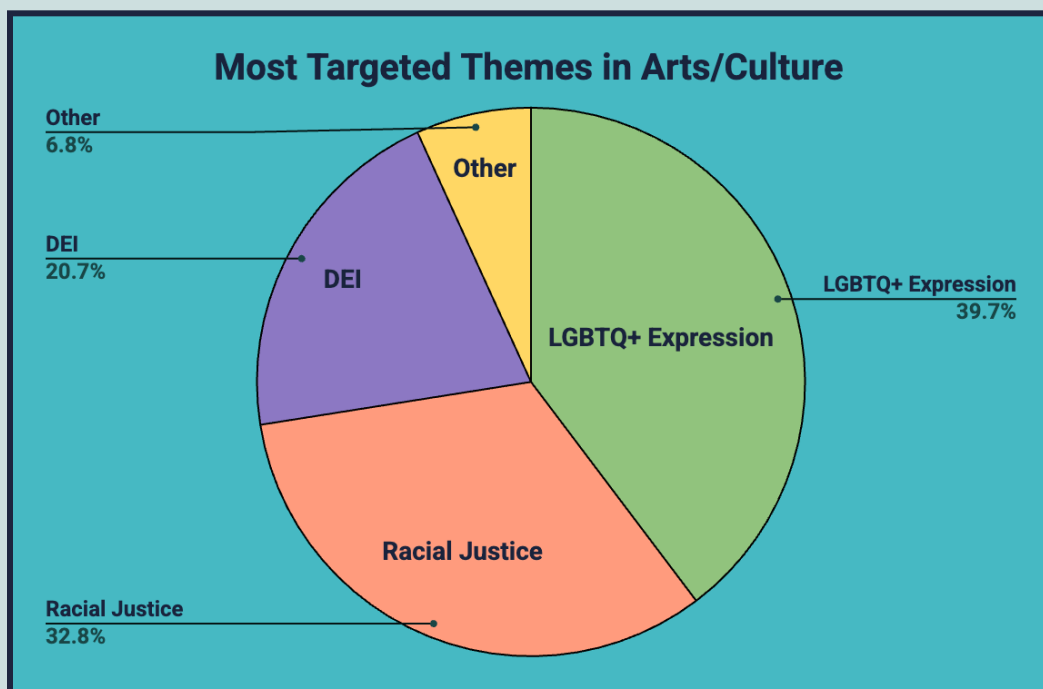
A visitor views a panel about slavery at the President's House site in Philadelphia, where an exhibit detailing the experiences of enslaved people was flagged for removal in 2025 following the implementation of EO 14253 and officially taken down in January 2026.  
Photo: New York Times

## Targeted Themes and Communities

Across the dataset, AFM's analysis indicates that interventions disproportionately focused on specific identities and themes framed by policymakers as “divisive” or “anti-American.” AFM's tracker indicates the most frequently targeted categories were artistic works with **LGBTQ+ themes or characters** and works engaging **racial justice, or Diversity, Equity, or Inclusion (DEI)**:

1. **LGBTQ+ representation** was the most frequently targeted category, with **23 laws and policies (39.7% of the data set)** seeking to censor LGBTQ+ content.

2. These measures ranged from the erasure of LGBTQ+ history at federal cultural sites to the NEA's mandate requiring grant applicants to certify that they would not use federal funds to promote "gender ideology."
3. **Racial justice** was referenced in **19 laws and policies (32.8% of the data set)** impacting arts and culture, resulting in the removal of exhibits addressing slavery and race, the deletion of academic databases on ethnic studies, and the elimination of Black student cultural programming at public universities.
4. **DEI** appeared in **12 laws and policies (20.7% of the data set)**, reflecting a broader campaign to dismantle DEI infrastructure across cultural institutions. These actions produced cascading effects, forcing institutions to self-censor, cancel programming, or abandon long-term research and education initiatives aimed at bringing minority or historically marginalized communities' stories into the cultural mainstream.



### 3. Governance and Administrative Control of Arts/Cultural Institutions

#### **Intervention in Cultural Institutional Governance**

Federal government actions leveraged political influence to intervene in the leadership, boards, and oversight structures of prominent cultural institutions, increasing the government's ability to shape programming decisions.<sup>30</sup> Though

framed as administrative reforms, these interventions weakened institutional independence and likely facilitated censorship through internal pressure and governance leverage rather than explicit prohibitions.

1. **Kennedy Center leadership overhaul leads to programming shifts (February 2025):** In 2025, President Trump removed most Biden-appointed trustees of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, installed new board members, and instated himself as Chairman.<sup>31</sup> Critics said this upended decades-long nonpartisan governance and raised censorship fears over programming decisions. Several performances and events scheduled for Pride month were cancelled at the Kennedy Center, including WorldPride concerts<sup>32</sup> and Gay Men's Chorus performances.<sup>33</sup>
2. **Executive Order 14253 "Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History"**<sup>34</sup> mandated a review of The Smithsonian Institution's records and programming for "divisive" or "anti-American" language in Smithsonian institutions. In May 2025, President Trump announced on social media that he had fired Kim Sajet, the President of the Smithsonian Institution, because of her alleged support for "DEI."<sup>35</sup> Though the Smithsonian claimed that the President had no authority to remove its museum directors because it is an independent trust rather than an executive-branch agency,<sup>36</sup> Ms. Sajet preemptively stepped down from her role.

#### **4. Immigration Restrictions Affecting Mobility of Artists:**

##### **Ideological Screening and Expression-Based Eligibility Policies**

**Five** legal and policy immigration measures indirectly affected migrant artists and cultural exchange programs. Executive actions expanded ideological screening, implemented mandatory social media vetting,<sup>37</sup> restricted gender recognition for visa applicants,<sup>38</sup> and imposed travel bans on nationals from 39 countries,<sup>39</sup> significantly limiting artist mobility and cross-border cultural exchange.

As an organization representing immigrant artists at risk in the United States, AFI has represented dozens of artists that have been denied entry or feared being denied entry into the United States due to their political beliefs or based on their country of origin. Further, we are currently representing several arts organizations who have had to cancel fellowships or programming involving high-profile foreign artists and cultural workers due to immigration restrictions, adversely affecting the diversity of arts events in the U.S. Common reasons for the denial of visa

applications to the United States include criticism of the Trump administration,<sup>40</sup> expressions of solidarity with Palestinians amidst ongoing Israeli military aggression,<sup>41</sup> or advocacy for trans rights,<sup>42</sup> among other beliefs.

1. **Executive Order 14341**<sup>43</sup> directed authorities to revoke visas or immigration benefits from foreign nationals alleged to have engaged in “flag desecration,” a form of expression protected under *Texas v. Johnson* (1989), placing politically engaged artists at risk of deportation.
2. **Presidential Proclamation 10949**<sup>44</sup> barred nationals from 12 countries from applying for U.S. visas, severely limiting artist mobility and international collaboration. On December 16, 2025 the list was updated to ban nationals from 39 countries and individuals with travel documents issued by the Palestinian Authority.
3. **USCIS guidance** requiring applicants to identify their sex assigned at birth restricted the freedom of expression of trans and non-binary artists,<sup>45</sup> while additional guidance mandated social media screening for vaguely defined “anti-American” ideology.<sup>46</sup> Artists have alleged that their visa denials may have been linked to their criticism of U.S. policy and the Trump administration.<sup>47</sup>

### III. Conclusion

Our analysis from the U.S Administration’s first year in office suggests that indirect and direct targeting of artistic freedom in the United States has become increasingly systemic, coordinated, and normalized. The Artistic Freedom Monitor exposes how cultural policy is being weaponized to constrain expression, reshape public memory, and undermine institutions central to democratic life. The erosion of artistic freedom signals broader threats to pluralism, accountability, and meaningful participation in public life—and underscores the urgency of sustained monitoring, advocacy, and public accountability.

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# ARTISTIC FREEDOM INITIATIVE

## About Artistic Freedom Initiative:

Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting artistic freedom and advancing the rights of artists and cultural workers worldwide.

The fact sheet is available online at  
[artisticfreedominitiative.org/artistic-freedom-monitor](https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/artistic-freedom-monitor)

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