# Freshfields breaks ranks to back Perkins Coie against Trump’s federal contract ban



Freshfields Bruckhaus Deringer, a prestigious UK-based law firm, has recently taken a bold stance in a politically charged landscape by supporting Perkins Coie, a firm embroiled in a controversial executive order issued by President Donald Trump. This order sought to ban Perkins Coie and similar firms from federal contracts due to their representation of Trump's political adversaries, including Hillary Clinton and George Soros. Freshfields distinguished itself as the sole top-20 global law firm to file an amicus brief in support of Perkins Coie, demonstrating a significant cultural and strategic shift within a firm historically rooted in European conservative values.

This decision underscores Freshfields' ambitious push into the US legal market, which has been characterised by aggressive expansion strategies since 2019. The firm's recruitment of high-profile figures, such as mergers and acquisitions lawyer Ethan Klingsberg from Cleary Gottlieb, has not only bolstered its capabilities but also broadened its client base, attracting major corporations like Google. Yet, this relentless pursuit of growth has come with financial repercussions; global staff costs have surged by nearly 60% since 2019, while profits have only risen by 32%, creating tensions within a partnership that must now navigate the complexities of American legal and political environments.

The decision to support Perkins Coie was driven by Georgia Dawson, Freshfields' senior partner, who consulted with a select group of largely US-based senior lawyers before taking the leap. While some partners expressed concerns about potential retaliation from Trump, particularly in light of the firm's recent receipt of an inquiry from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), many viewed the move as an opportunity to solidify Freshfields’ brand among clients who value firms willing to take principled stands on pressing issues.

This shift is emblematic of a larger generational change in the legal industry, where firms are increasingly expected to express their values publicly. A partner at Freshfields noted that this moment reflects an evolving expectation for law firms to engage with societal issues rather than remain apolitical. This has already begun to reshape the firm’s internal culture, as European partners balance the traditional norms of their backgrounds with the more politically engaged attitudes prevalent in the US.

In signing the amicus brief for Perkins Coie, Freshfields has positioned itself apart from its US counterparts, many of whom have opted instead to negotiate deals with the Trump administration to avoid punitive actions for past associations. Notably, firms like Skadden and Paul Weiss struck agreements that involved commitments to provide pro bono services whilst navigating political sensitivities, highlighting a notable divide in strategies among firms responding to Trump’s executive actions.

While Freshfields has not faced the direct repercussions seen by other firms, the situation remains fluid. The recent ruling by a Washington DC district judge, which blocked the executive order targeting Perkins Coie, serves as a temporary reprieve for those firms embroiled in litigation against the administration. Nonetheless, the legal community is left grappling with the implications of these executive actions, which critics argue may undermine judicial independence and ethical standards in the profession.

As Freshfields continues to navigate this turbulent environment, the firm's future will hinge on its ability to maintain its principled stance without alienating vital client relationships or jeopardising its expanding American presence. The firm's willingness to withstand political pressures could well become a distinguishing factor in its quest to establish a robust foothold in one of the world's most competitive legal markets.

The repercussions of Freshfields' decisions will soon manifest in shifts in partner recruitment and client engagement. Law firms that have aligned with Trump's administration are now facing scrutiny from clients concerned about their ethical obligations and political affiliations. With Freshfields’ recent actions stirring interest among potential hires from firms that opted for compromise, the long-term implications of this political stand will be critical as the firm seeks to balance its legacy with its ambitious future.

As the legal landscape continues to evolve under the shadow of political turbulence, Freshfields' decisions will likely serve as a benchmark within the industry, exemplifying the challenges and opportunities firms face in asserting their identities in an increasingly politicised world.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraphs 1, 2, 5, 6
2. Paragraphs 3, 5, 6
3. Paragraphs 1, 4, 5
4. Paragraphs 3, 5
5. Paragraphs 1, 2, 3, 6
6. Paragraphs 2, 4
7. Paragraphs 3, 4

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.ft.com/content/1d56ce76-14b4-422f-a75b-f8b041624cba> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/1d56ce76-14b4-422f-a75b-f8b041624cba> - Freshfields, a leading UK-based law firm, took a bold stance by supporting US law firms targeted by President Donald Trump's executive order that banned them from federal contracts due to their representation of Trump adversaries. As the only top 20 global law firm to sign an amicus brief in support of Perkins Coie and later other firms, Freshfields risked political backlash but aimed to demonstrate principle and independence. This decision marks a key cultural shift for the firm, which has aggressively expanded into the US market since 2019 through high-profile hires and new offices. While this move has enhanced its presence and client base, especially in M&A and antitrust, it has also strained finances, with global staff costs rising and non-US partners subsidizing American growth. Internally, the firm's culture and power balance are shifting amid generational and geopolitical changes. Freshfields' action was led by senior partner Georgia Dawson and received mixed reactions but enhanced its reputation among clients and potential hires. However, it now risks being targeted by the Trump administration, especially after receiving a diversity-related inquiry from the EEOC. The firm faces a critical test as it decides whether to maintain its stance or align with US rivals that struck deals with Trump.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/86a9dc14-49d8-47df-a0ea-cb90c26544e7> - Freshfields, a major UK law firm, is making significant moves in the U.S. market, highlighted by the 2019 recruitment of star lawyer Ethan Klingsberg and subsequent increase in American partners and high-profile clients like Google. This expansion, however, has strained finances and sparked internal cultural debates, particularly after Freshfields alone among the top-20 global firms supported Perkins Coie in opposing a contentious executive order from Donald Trump. Senior partner Georgia Dawson backed the decision, signaling a shift in the firm’s political commitments.
4. <https://apnews.com/article/fc64fcda098b52756294c3d6a3b3d998> - Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom, a prominent international law firm, has negotiated a deal with President Donald Trump to allocate at least $100 million in free legal services and review its hiring practices to avoid an executive order. This agreement follows the issuance of orders that have targeted various legal institutions, leading to lawsuits from firms such as WilmerHale and Jenner & Block, which aimed to prevent the suspension of their attorneys' security clearances and federal building access. Federal judges have temporarily blocked key parts of these orders against the suing firms. The firms argue that the orders represent an unconstitutional retaliation by the President, punishing them for their previous associations with prosecutors who investigated Trump. Other law firms, including Paul Weiss, have also chosen to negotiate rather than pursue litigation, highlighting divisions within the legal community on how to respond to Trump's demands.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/legal/former-top-lawyers-major-companies-decry-trump-orders-against-law-firms-2025-04-08/> - On April 8, 2025, 67 former top lawyers from major U.S. corporations such as Microsoft, Intel, and Eli Lilly filed a legal brief criticizing executive orders by President Donald Trump. The orders target law firms like Perkins Coie, WilmerHale, and Jenner & Block, suspending their access to government facilities and threatening federal contracts with their clients. The former legal counsels argue that these actions undermine constitutional protections and erode the rule of law, warning that businesses may be coerced into political conformity. They support Perkins Coie’s ongoing lawsuit against the administration, emphasizing that such executive actions weaponize federal power against legal firms based on their political associations or clients. Several law firms have already secured temporary legal victories against the orders. Some firms have struck deals with the administration to avoid punitive orders, pledging free legal services and adherence to specific employment practices. Critics argue these orders target firms representing individuals or issues opposed to Trump's policies and punish diversity efforts, raising concerns about political retaliation and corporate legal autonomy.
6. <https://www.aclu.org/press-releases/legal-organizations-across-ideologies-file-amicus-brief-urging-court-enjoin-executive-order-targeting-perkins-coie> - On March 6, the Trump administration issued an executive order placing sanctions on law firm Perkins Coie for their past work on voting rights lawsuits and their representation of President Trump’s prior political opponents. This morning, 11 legal advocacy organizations filed an amicus brief asking the court to strike down the executive order, including: ACLU, ACLU of D.C., Cato Institute, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, Institute for Justice, Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, National Coalition Against Censorship, Reporters Committee for the Freedom of the Press, The Rutherford Institute, Society for the Rule of Law Institute. Among the key arguments within the brief include: "The executive order unconstitutionally retaliates against Perkins Coie for its constitutionally protected advocacy." Both the speech and petition clauses of the First Amendment protect the firm’s legal advocacy on behalf of its clients, and prohibit the Trump administration from punishing advocacy it disapproves. "The executive order violates separation of powers and due process." In the adversarial legal system, the judiciary relies on the assistance of lawyers willing to challenge the government, in order to adjudicate whether the government’s actions violate the Constitution.
7. <https://time.com/7272466/law-firms-trump-wilmerhale-jenner-block-paul-weiss-covington-burling/> - Since returning to the presidency, Donald Trump has taken significant action against several high-profile law firms, accusing them of partisan behavior and representing interests contrary to his administration. Targeted firms include WilmerHale, Jenner & Block, Paul, Weiss, Perkins Coie, and Covington & Burling. Trump's actions involved revoking security clearances, canceling federal contracts, and limiting access to government buildings. These measures primarily affect firms that had ties to investigations into Trump or represented clients opposing his administration. For instance, WilmerHale employed former special counsel Robert Mueller, and Perkins Coie commissioned opposition research into Trump for Hillary Clinton's 2016 campaign. While Trump justified his moves as holding law firms to legal and ethical standards, many—including the American Bar Association—condemned the actions as politically motivated retribution. Several firms filed lawsuits, and courts have temporarily blocked parts of the orders. Paul, Weiss and Skadden, Arps preemptively settled with the administration, with Paul, Weiss dedicating $40 million in pro bono services and Skadden agreeing to halt DEI initiatives and commit $100 million in pro bono work. The legal community remains divided, with critics warning these moves threaten judicial independence and undermine professional ethics.