

Polls shows mass opposition to net neutrality repeal

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In the week since the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to overturn net neutrality—against overwhelming public opposition—the political motivation for the deregulation of broadband internet service providers (ISPs) is becoming clearer.

An opinion poll conducted by the University of Maryland on the eve of the FCC decision showed that 83 percent of Americans opposed repealing net neutrality. Poll respondents rejected the arguments of FCC Chairman Ajit Pai and, according to the director of the school's Program for Public Consultation Steve Kull, American public opinion is “blowing in the opposite direction” from government policy.

The Maryland poll results showed an increase in support for net neutrality over the past several months, with surveys over the summer and fall showing opposition to the repeal plan at around 75 percent. In a Mozilla-sponsored poll last May, for example, three-quarters of the population expressed no confidence that either the Trump administration or Congress would defend their right to internet access.

Net neutrality is the principle that the owners of the cable and wireless infrastructure of the internet must treat all information and data equally and deliver it to the public without regard to content or source. In 2015, the FCC voted to formalize net neutrality and block the ISPs from implementing paid prioritization, “throttling” download speeds and alternately restricting or promoting web sites that their customers access.

The strength of public support for a genuinely free and open internet was illustrated in a *New York Times* article titled “In Protests of Net Neutrality Repeal, Teenage Voices Stood Out.” The *Times* reported that protests were organized by young people in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and Keene, New Hampshire, and a group of students drove from Centerville, Maryland to

Washington, DC to protest the end of net neutrality.

The *Times* also cited an Associated Press study that showed 94 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds use social media and 98 percent of children through age eight access a mobile device at home, up from 52 percent in 2011.

As with the present “Tax Cut and Jobs Act” about to be signed into law by President Trump, the repeal of net neutrality was accompanied by an unprecedented level of hypocrisy and lying. As is apparent to everyone, the end of net neutrality—which goes officially into effect within several weeks—was implemented to further the interests of the giant telecom corporations in blatant disregard for the public interest.

That the telecoms are moving to capitalize on the net neutrality overthrow was revealed in a query by the Associated Press of the top seven ISPs. Among those asked—Verizon, AT&T, Comcast, Charter, Cox, Sprint and T-Mobile—none of them were willing to rule out the possibility of paid prioritization or the creation of internet “fast lanes.” Paid prioritization is a practice whereby content providers such as YouTube and Netflix must pay the ISPs to make faster access available to consumers.

The response of the US Congress to the FCC decision has shed further light on the political impulse and deception behind ending the 2015 regulations. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn), chair of the House Energy Subcommittee on Communications and Technology and outspoken advocate of FCC Chairman Pai, stepped forward on Tuesday with a bill called the “Open Internet Preservation Act” that will prevent efforts by state and local governments to defend net neutrality. Blackburn’s bill officially legalizes the creation of internet “fast lanes.”

One year ago, Blackburn—who has accepted major campaign contributions from the telecom industry—distinguished herself by calling on the ISPs to censor internet content. During a CNN interview to discuss the 2016 elections, Blackburn said, “If anyone is putting fake news out there, the ISPs have the obligation to, in some way, get that off the web. And maybe it’s time for these information systems to look to have some type of news editor doing some vetting on that.”

Meanwhile, a group of congressional Democrats headed by Sen. Edward Markey (D-Mass.) have announced a “pledge” to introduce legislation to invalidate the FCC’s net neutrality decision under the terms of the Congressional Review Act. According to the rules of the act, Congress has 60 days to block the agency’s decision. No one is taking this charade seriously, since it requires all Democrats and some Republicans to move it forward.

The dismantling of net neutrality is an attack on the basic democratic rights of the working class. No confidence can be placed in Congress or the US courts to defend the right to free and open access to online news and information. Genuine freedom of expression on the internet can be guaranteed only through public ownership of the hardware and software of the internet—as a critical part, like electricity, gas and water, of the infrastructure of society. The struggle to defend the most basic democratic rights is thus inseparably bound up with the fight for socialism.



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