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POLICY & ACTION FROM CONSUMER REPORTS

Net Neutrality: What You Need to Know

What is Net Neutrality?

Net neutrality is the idea that internet service providers (ISPs) must treat all websites, apps, and other online services equally.

Specifically, the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) net neutrality rules state that ISPs:

- cannot block or slow down any legal websites, apps, or online services;
- cannot favor or speed up traffic to any sites;
- cannot charge websites a fee for preferential treatment; and
- must disclose important information to consumers, including fees, broadband speeds, promotional rates, and data caps.

The rules also enable the FCC to determine on a case-by-case basis whether an ISP has unreasonably interfered with consumer access to online content or a company's ability to create and deliver such content.

Why is Net Neutrality important now?

Without net neutrality rules, ISPs could charge a toll to any websites they choose—limiting consumer choices, harming competition, and hitting consumers squarely in the wallet.

In fact, some ISPs are known to have done the very things prohibited by the FCC's net neutrality rules. And lawyers for the industry have acknowledged that, without the current rules, ISPs would explore the idea of charging websites fees for preferential treatment.

In short, we at Consumer Reports believe that strong net neutrality rules are vital to consumers' everyday lives and essential to preserving the internet as we know it today—an open marketplace where websites large and small compete on equal terms and where information and ideas move freely.

Unfortunately, many ISPs are actively lobbying lawmakers and regulators to chip away at net neutrality rules. And the new chairman of the FCC, Ajit Pai, has proposed a plan that would effectively eliminate them. Net neutrality is under imminent threat.

What you can do to maintain net neutrality

Individual consumers can make a difference. First, know that net neutrality and the rules that support it are overwhelmingly supported by consumers. (A recent Consumer Reports survey found that more than two-thirds of Americans believe an internet provider should not be able to block or slow a competitor's streaming service.) And know that it was a wave of popular support that convinced the FCC to issue net neutrality rules in 2015. So start by submitting your comments at <https://consumersunion.org/netneutrality/>.

In addition, we urge you to speak directly to your elected officials. Remember, they work for you, and your personal experiences and concerns should be important to them. Town hall events are set up specifically for this kind of communication. But if you can't find a town hall near you, you can always drop by lawmakers' offices near your home to share your thoughts in person. No appointment is necessary!

How to influence lawmakers and their staff

Here are some general tips for influencing your member of Congress:

- **Plan ahead.** Know in advance what you want to say and how you want to say it. Practice telling your story or conveying your message in under a minute.
- **Identify yourself.** State your name and where you live, note that you voted for the official (if you did) and that you are a constituent.
- **Don't get wonky.** This isn't the time for going deep on policy details. Focus on your personal connection to the issue at hand—and if you have a story to tell, tell it.
- **Stay calm.** Anger will distract from the substance of your message, so share your concerns or stories in a calm and matter-of-fact tone.
- **Articulate “the ask.”** In other words, be really clear about what you want the elected official to do.
- **Take a photo.** Politicians love photo ops! You can then tweet or share the photo on Facebook and thank your member for the meeting.
- **Follow up!** Send a thank you email, attaching any documents mentioned, providing answers to questions that came up, and re-articulating your ask.

Questions for lawmakers and their staff

Here are a few pointed questions about net neutrality that you can ask at town hall meetings with elected officials.

- Question 1: “Congress gave the big cable and phone companies a gift this year by getting rid of privacy rules preventing them from selling my personal information (like a history of the websites I visit online) without my permission. And now the FCC wants to get rid net neutrality rules that make sure I can go anywhere online with worrying about a website or a service like Netflix being blocked or slowed down. **Who's looking out for consumers? Is the government more interested in doing favors for companies like Comcast, AT&T, Verizon, and Charter?”**
- Question 2: “I heard the FCC is arguing that net neutrality is government regulation of the internet, and that's why we should get rid of it. But that doesn't make any sense: Net neutrality rules are rules for cable and phone companies who provide access to the internet. Those companies don't own the internet and they didn't create it. And those rules just prevent those companies from blocking or slowing down access or making consumers pay extra for better access. **Do you agree?”**
- Question 3: “I've seen a lot of surveys showing that most consumers want to keep net neutrality. So it seems like the only people in favor of getting rid of it are the big cable and phone companies. I pay enough to them already. **Who's looking out for me?”**