

# [***Trump's playboy past is in the spotlight. His allies are readying a new fight against pornography***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6C1M-CRK1-JBSS-S016-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Byline:** By Steve Contorno, CNN

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**Body**

(CNN) &#8212; For the past several weeks, witnesses in [*Donald Trump*](https://www.cnn.com/politics/president-donald-trump-45)'s [*hush money trial*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/13/politics/donald-trump-hush-money-trial-explained/index.html) have evoked a chapter of his past when the adult entertainment industry helped him brandish an image as a Manhattan playboy.

If some of the former president's allies get their way, a second Trump term would put that industry on the ropes - and potentially its actors and producers behind bars.

A movement to rein in online pornography is rapidly intensifying, fueled by conservative outrage and growing unease over the accessibility of sexual content online, especially for children. In dozens of states, the porn industry is on the defense and facing new threats to its existence after decades of expansion in the internet era.

Now, those cheering on the effort are preparing to take the push national, putting porn producers as well as teachers, librarians and tech companies on notice - and they increasingly view Trump as a potential linchpin in the coming fight.

"It's a very good opportunity for President Trump to continue to build on his legacy of being supportive of working families and children," said Terry Schilling, the president of American Principles Project, one of the driving forces behind the new state laws.

The cause has support within some of the highest reaches of Trump's orbit, including the Heritage Foundation, a Washington, DC-based conservative think tank that is already laying the groundwork for the Republican's potential return to the White House. Through its Project 2025 initiative, the organization published a 900-page blueprint for another Trump term. Pornography is mentioned on the first page; banning pornography and locking up those who produce it are proposed on Page 5.

At first glance, Trump appears an unlikely champion for cracking down on the adult entertainment industry. Long before launching a political career, Trump developed a history with Playboy, the men's magazine that helped mainstream pornography and pioneered its place in the lawfare over free speech. He was an occasional guest at Hugh Hefner's famed Playboy Mansion and made cameos in soft-core pornographic films produced by the company - though not in any scenes depicting sexual content or nudity. During his 2016 race, he proudly displayed an issue of Playboy magazine that featured him on the cover.

Allegations stemming from that period - including affairs with porn star [*Stormy Daniels*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/07/politics/stormy-daniels-profile-trump-hush-money-trial/index.html) and Playboy centerfold Karen McDougal - sit at the heart of the Manhattan district attorney's case against Trump, the first criminal prosecution of an American president. McDougal has previously claimed she met Trump at the Playboy Mansion, an encounter she said led to an eight-month affair. In [*testimony last week*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/05/07/politics/takeaways-stormy-daniels-hush-money-testimony/index.html), Daniels said her 2006 tryst with Trump occurred at a celebrity golf tournament in Lake Tahoe where her adult film company sponsored a hole.

Trump has denied the allegations.

Heritage President Kevin Roberts is unconcerned by Trump's past. He likened it to the parable of the prodigal son, a New Testament teaching about paternal forgiveness granted to a man who squanders his father's fortune with indulgences.

"We understand our lord works with imperfect instruments, including us," Roberts said in a recent interview with CNN. "While on the surface it seems like a contradiction, on the whole, it may make him a more powerful messenger if he embraces it."

Roberts hasn't discussed the topic directly with Trump, but he has talked to the campaign and said there is alignment among those who have policy influence, including Ben Carson, the former secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Charlie Kirk, the founder of the conservative young voter group Turning Points USA and a close Trump ally, has also made curbing pornography a recurring focus of his popular podcast.

"Without being presumptuous of the president's will, there will at least be conversations on this being a priority we can tackle," Roberts said.

Asked about the focus on pornography by Project 2025 and other closely aligned groups, Trump's campaign pointed to a past statement from its top advisers, Chris LaCivita and Susie Wiles, downplaying any connection between those organizations and the former president's plans for a second term.

"Let us be very specific here: unless a message is coming directly from President Trump or an authorized member of his campaign team, no aspect of future presidential staffing or policy announcements should be deemed official," the statement from LaCivita and Wiles said.

'Sex is the canary in the coal mine'

The Supreme Court has deemed previous attempts to curb online pornography unconstitutional on First Amendment grounds. But Schilling's group and others have successfully pushed a growing number of states to test the legal system once again.

In the past two years, 10 states have moved to force adult websites to verify the age of their users - often with bipartisan support - and legislatures in two dozen others are considering nearly identical legislation, according to a bill tracker maintained by the Free Speech Coalition, the advocacy group for the online pornography industry. In some states, porn websites cannot be accessed without showing identification confirming the user is over 18 years of age.

Supporters of these laws argue the tools for restricting websites have become more sophisticated in the two decades since the Supreme Court struck down Congress' first stab at requiring age checks. They point to industries such as online gambling and mobile alcohol sales that have successfully integrated age verifications. Meanwhile, the availability of the internet has made it much easier for sexual content to reach kids in a way that necessitates legislative action, they say.

The porn industry and free speech advocates contend these laws violate the First Amendment rights of consenting adults to produce and view sexual content. Requiring a government-issued ID to watch pornography is akin to having Big Brother peer into the most intimate quarters of Americans' personal lives, they argue.

The US Supreme Court last month [*declined to block*](https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/30/politics/supreme-court-texas-porn-age-verification/index.html) the Texas version of the law from taking effect while an appeal is considered.

"Sex is the canary in the coal mine of free speech," said Mike Stabile, spokesman for the Free Speech Coalition. "It may sound good to create age-verification laws, but what these people are really trying to do is create a larger censorship regime so that you have to show who you are to access sensitive content."

Pornhub, one of the most trafficked websites in the world, and its sister sites have blocked access in seven states - Virginia, Montana, North Carolina, Arkansas, Utah, Mississippi and Texas - as a means to comply with new laws.

The adult industry insists it doesn't want children accessing its material but says the onus should be on Apple, Google and other device makers to sell phones and tablets with default settings that ensure kids can't access adult content, an alternative that technology companies oppose.

"Parents, not the government, are best positioned to make these judgments based on their own family's unique needs and values," said Robert Winterton, spokesman for NetChoice, an organization that represents tech companies including Amazon, X and Facebook. "One-size-fits-all mandates are unlikely to be effective and risk undermining the constitutional and parental authority."

Purveyors of online pornography have long assumed the recent wave of age-restriction laws is a means to put them out of business. In Louisiana, the first state to pass such laws, Pornhub saw an 80% decline in traffic, executives for the company told CNN, citing Google Analytics data.

Heritage's Project 2025 has given credence to their concerns. It likens pornography to illicit drugs in declaring the content "should be outlawed" and "the people who produce and distribute it should be imprisoned." Teachers and librarians who distribute content Heritage deems pornographic "should be classified as registered sex offenders," the document continues, and tech companies that facilitate its spread "should be shuttered."

"We see pornography as undermining the public good, not just for children but all adults," Roberts told CNN. "We think that's in the purview of Congress."

The National Center on Sexual Exploitation - a leading advocate against pornography that for most of its existence went by the name "Morality in Media" and has worked closely on these state laws - has also publicly stated its goal is "to ensure the online pornography industry is taken down once and for all."

"These laws don't work because they weren't designed to work," said Solomon Friedman, a lawyer and co-founding partner of Ethical Capital Partners, the Canadian firm that purchased Pornhub last year. "They weren't designed to protect young people from accessing adult content. They were designed to protect adults from accessing adult content, which, of course, is their stated aim. It's not a conspiracy theory when it's written on Page 1."

Schilling disputed that his organization is working toward a federal prohibition on porn, telling CNN: "It's been tough enough getting legislators on board with age verification."

"***Politics*** and public policy have to be based in political reality," he said.

Given Heritage's influence - the organization is full of the former president's staff, and the person leading Project 2025, Paul Dans, is a former Trump administration official who told a recent gathering of religious broadcasters that he expects to return to the White House if Republicans are victorious this fall - they are not dismissing the threat, Stabile said.

"We're taking it deathly seriously," Stabile said. "Not just for us, but for all kinds of communities around sex or gender. This isn't a joke to us. This isn't theoretical."

Next steps

Schilling and others want a Trump administration to more aggressively use the US Department of Justice to utilize existing laws to target content they view as obscene. They have also proposed a federal version of age-verification legislation that has successfully passed in states.

"It's gotta go national," Schilling said. "Why should kids from California not be protected from pornography online?"

Any law signed by Trump would run into the same constitutional objections raised by the US Supreme Court in the past, said Stuart Brotman, a media professor at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Proponents hope the court, which skews conservative and includes three Trump appointees, will take a different view. Brotman - who has written extensively on pornography and free speech, including a book on Playboy's Hefner - is skeptical.

"The Roberts court has been considered a highly First Amendment-friendly court," Brotman said. "It would be difficult for some of the justices now to indicate there's a more narrow view of the First amendment."

If Trump chooses to embrace this cause, it wouldn't be the first time. The GOP platform when he was first nominated in 2016 said pornography was "destroying the lives of millions." That same year, Trump signed a pledge that he would consider a presidential commission to examine the "public health impact of Internet pornography on youth, families and the American culture."

Advocates were ultimately let down by his administration, said Ben Bull, general counsel for the National Center on Sexual Exploitation.

"We don't know if it's political expediency or if it's heartfelt this time," Bull said. "We'll see. But people are only going to be fooled for so long."

By Steve Contorno, CNN

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