



Tech &gt; Services &amp; Software

# What you need to know about the FCC's net neutrality repeal

The FCC has voted to roll back Obama-era regulation protecting an open internet. Here's a quick rundown to help you understand the issues.



Marguerite Reardon

Dec. 14, 2017 2:24 p.m. PT

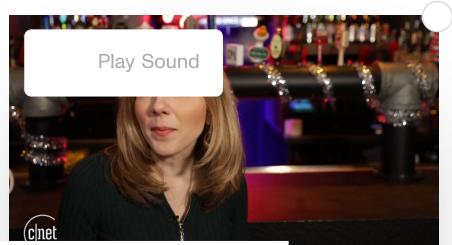
6 min read



Sarah Tew/CNET

President Donald Trump's [FCC](#) has put the kibosh on controversial Obama-era net neutrality regulations.

At its monthly meeting Thursday, the Federal Communications Commission, led by Republican Chairman Ajit Pai, [voted to repeal regulation passed in 2015](#) that prevented broadband companies from blocking or slowing access to websites or services. The rules also prohibited broadband companies from offering paid-priority services that



Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories? [No, thank you](#) [Accept](#) 00:01 / 02:10

While many people agree with the basic principles of net neutrality, those specific rules became a lightning rod for controversy.



FCC Chairman Ajit Pai has a markedly different take on net neutrality than his predecessor.

Aaron Robinson/CNET

That's because in order to get the rules to hold up in court, the FCC in 2015 reclassified broadband networks so that they fell under the same strict regulations that govern telephone networks.

Pai, who has called those rules "heavy-handed," contending that they've deterred innovation and depressed investment in building and expanding broadband networks, says he's returning the FCC to a "light touch" approach to regulation.

In November, he released a draft copy of his repeal proposal to the public.



**Now playing:** Beer helps explain battle brewing over net neutrality ▶ 2:10

In a last-ditch effort to get Congress to step in and stop the vote, protesters gathered in front of Verizon stores and at the FCC headquarters in Washington, DC. And they mounted online protests. But in the end, the vote went ahead as planned.

"The internet as we know it is not ending," Pai said. "Americans will still be able to access sites they want to visit and services they want to use. There will still be cops on the beat the way things were prior to 2015."

In case you're still unsure of what all this net neutrality stuff means, we've assembled this FAQ to put everything in plain English.

Play Sound

## What is net neutrality?

Net neutrality is the principle that all traffic on the internet should be treated equally. It means that no company can discriminate against certain types of traffic or charge higher fees for certain types of traffic. This is important because it ensures that everyone has equal access to the internet, regardless of their location or the type of device they are using.

Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories? [No, thank you](#)

00:01 / 02:10

Warner, or Comcast, which owns NBC Universal, can't favor their own content over a competitor's content.

## I understand what it means not to block or slow traffic. But what's paid priority all about?

In addition to rules that prevent broadband companies from blocking or throttling access to the internet, the FCC in 2015 included a rule that banned broadband providers from charging a company, like Netflix, an extra fee to serve its customers faster than a competitor.

Net neutrality supporters say that such fees could lead to a pay-to-play internet, with large companies like Netflix, Google or Facebook paying for speedier access, while startups, which can't afford the added cost, could get left out. And that could ultimately result in fewer choices for consumers and less innovation. It could also result in higher prices for consumers, as the added costs trickle down.

## Is there any benefit to getting rid of these rules?

Broadband companies said the 2015 regulations were too restrictive. They also say they've voluntarily committed to not blocking or slowing internet access, so explicit rules are unnecessary.

While no ISP has announced specific plans to offer paid-priority services, several executives say they might in the future. They argue there are certain applications -- in medicine or in the development of autonomous vehicles -- that require fast, low-latency internet connections that a paid-priority service would deliver.

"You don't want your self-driving car operating on best-effort-delivery bandwidth," Randall Stephenson, CEO of AT&T, said last month in an interview at the Economic Club of New York. "If you have any expectation of medical professionals using wireless networks for surgery or EMS or other types of medical applications, you don't want to outlaw paid prioritization."

Play Sound

## If broadband companies don't plan to inhibit traffic and have no plans to offer paid priority, what's the debate

Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories? [No, thank you](#)

Accept

00:01 / 02:10

Fundamentally, this debate has been about whether or not the FCC should have the authority to regulate the internet.

Big companies like AT&T, Comcast and Verizon say they're committed to protecting net neutrality. But opposed the FCC's reclassification, in 2015, of broadband as a public utility, which allowed the agency to regulate their broadband networks like the telephone network.

But without classifying broadband as a utility, the FCC couldn't impose its 2015 rules.

## Why were internet service providers so opposed to classifying broadband as a utility?

Broadband providers feared the FCC would try to set prices on their services or would require them to share their infrastructure with competitors. Pai says that the regulations have already hurt businesses and that investments in broadband infrastructure are down in 2017 compared to 2015 when the rules were adopted.

Net neutrality supporters disputed those points and said that phone and cable companies made record profits after the new classification was imposed. What's more, they said, broadband companies didn't tell their investors that they had to curtail investment due to government regulation.

## More on net neutrality

- [FCC chief moves to eliminate net neutrality regulations](#)
- [Net and tech pioneers: Hey FCC, don't repeal net neutrality](#)
- [Ajit Pai calls Twitter the real threat to an open internet](#)
- [This FCC commissioner vows to keep looking out for you](#)
- [Net neutrality could spur the next big political movement](#)

"After complaining about what it would do to their investment climate, as soon as it was passed, a lot of these companies told their investors that it wouldn't make a difference," Sen. Brian Schatz, a Democrat from Hawaii, said in an interview. "When a publicly traded company says something doesn't make a difference in terms of their investments, I trust that they are representing those facts accurately."

Play Sound

## What do the rules mean?

Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories? [No, thank you](#)

00:01 / 02:10

The internet has been called the great equalizer in our society, because it offers anyone with a product to sell, an idea to share or a service to offer the ability to reach billions of people across the world.

How the FCC classifies broadband is a big deal, net neutrality supporters say, because it affects how consumers experience the internet. Without FCC rules and oversight, broadband companies, at least in theory, could limit, restrict or manipulate the types of services and voices you experience online.

Net neutrality supporters fear that without these protections, broadband companies could curate your internet experience like cable TV does, with customers subscribing to groups of channels or sites.

## Net neutrality supporters take protest to Verizon stores



+33 more

See all photos →

Broadband providers argue that these fears are overblown. They say market forces will keep them honest and that the internet will continue grow as it did in the days before net neutrality regulations.

But critics note that some regional and rural markets have only one broadband service provider available to them, which undermines the argument that free markets will protect consumers.

Also, consider that large ISPs like Comcast, through its ownership of NBC Universal, and AT&T, with its planned acquisition of Time Warner, are also creating content and competing with companies that use their networks to deliver services. Critics say, and the courts have agreed, that this gives broadband companies an incentive to disadvantage competitors.

Play Sound

## Will I r interne

Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories? [No, thank you](#)

00:01 / 02:10

## voted to repeal the rules?

No. Or at least, not immediately. For one thing, the repeal won't go into effect until the new order adopted by the FCC is published in the Federal Register, which is likely to happen early in 2018. But even after that happens and the rules are officially repealed, it's unlikely that your experience of the internet will instantly be different than it was before the repeal.

The changes that many net neutrality supporters fear are likely to happen slowly as cable and phone companies roll out new services and change their business models.

The same is true of the benefits that the broadband providers say will come from repealing the rules. Promised increased investment and the positive effects on service quality and reach won't be felt immediately either.

## What's next?

Net neutrality supporters have vowed to continue the fight in court. Expect lawsuits to be filed early in 2018 after the FCC's repeal order is published in the Federal Register. The legal challenges will likely take years to resolve.

Meanwhile, there's some interest on Capitol Hill to pass legislation to protect net neutrality. But because this issue has become so politicized it's hard to imagine a bipartisan effort.

And on Thursday, politicians from California, Washington and New York said they will use a mix of legislative and legal moves to fight the FCC's vote.

"I will sue to stop the FCC's illegal rollback of #netneutrality," New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman said in a tweet Thursday. "New Yorkers and all Americans deserve a free and open internet."

One thing's clear: This is not the last you'll hear of net neutrality.

*First published Dec. 12 at 5:49 a.m. PT.*

**Updated Dec. 14 at 2:24 p.m. PT:** Added the results of Thursday FCC vote and reaction to it.

Play Sound

**CNET Magazine:** Check out a sample of the stories in CNET's newsstand edition.

iHate: CNET  
internet.



Want CNET to notify you of price drops and the latest stories?

No, thank you

Accept

00:01 / 02:10



Play Sound

**Beer helps explain**

00:01 / 02:10