

AI-01781 No Neutral Switches

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🕒 Created time	@June 29, 2025 8:07 AM

Explain more about the history of Smart Switch with no neutral. How was it invented? Is there a power storage in the circuit? Deep dive.

The development of "no neutral" smart switches is a fascinating example of engineering ingenuity responding to a practical challenge in the home automation market.

History of "No Neutral" Smart Switches: A Practical Necessity

The concept of a "smart switch" (a wall-mounted switch that can be controlled remotely or automatically) emerged with the rise of home automation and IoT (Internet of Things) devices. Early smart switches, like most electronic devices, were designed with the assumption of having both a live and a neutral wire readily available in the wall box to provide continuous power to their internal electronics (Wi-Fi/Zigbee modules, microcontrollers, relays, etc.).

However, a significant hurdle in widespread adoption, particularly in older homes, became apparent: **many existing light switch boxes do not have a neutral wire.** Electrical codes in many regions, especially older ones, only mandated that the "live" wire and the "switched live" (the wire going to the light fixture) be present at the switch. The neutral wire for the lighting circuit typically went directly to the light fixture from the main electrical panel.

This created a major retrofit problem: homeowners with older wiring would have to undertake costly and invasive electrical work to pull a neutral wire to every switch box they wanted to make "smart." This limited the market significantly.

The invention of the "no neutral" smart switch wasn't a single Eureka! moment, but rather an evolutionary response driven by market demand and technological advancements in low-power electronics. Manufacturers recognized the need for a solution that could power the smart switch's internal

components without a dedicated neutral wire. This led to the development of methods that "steal" power from the existing two-wire circuit.

The general timeline for the increasing prevalence of no-neutral switches would roughly follow:

- **Early 2000s - 2010s:** As home automation started to gain traction, the neutral wire requirement became a well-known pain point. Some early, less sophisticated solutions might have emerged, possibly with more noticeable side effects like flickering.
- **Mid-2010s - Present:** With the miniaturization of components, increasing efficiency of microcontrollers, and the widespread adoption of low-power wireless protocols like Zigbee and Wi-Fi, the feasibility of "no neutral" designs improved significantly. Manufacturers invested in R&D to refine the trickle current method and develop effective bypass modules. Companies like Shelly, Aqara, and BroadLink became notable for offering robust no-neutral options.¹

The driving force was clearly the need to make smart lighting accessible to a much wider installed base of homes without requiring extensive rewiring.

Is There Power Storage in the Circuit? Deep Dive.

Yes, **capacitors are crucial for power storage** in almost all "no neutral" smart switch designs. Let's delve into how and why:

1. The Challenge of Powering the Electronics:

- **When the light is OFF:** As explained before, the switch allows a tiny "trickle current" to flow through the light fixture and back to the neutral at the fixture. This current is very small (often in the milliamperage range) and is insufficient to illuminate the bulb (especially incandescents, though it can cause LEDs to glow or flicker). The smart switch harvests this trickle current to power its internal electronics.
- **When the light is ON:** This is the more complex scenario. When the smart switch's relay (or TRIAC/MOSFET, if it's a dimmer) closes to turn the light on, it essentially creates a short circuit across its own power input. If the switch relied solely on trickle current at this point, its internal electronics would lose power and shut down, meaning you couldn't remotely turn the light off or maintain its smart functionality.

2. The Role of Capacitors (and sometimes inductors):

- **Energy Harvesting (When Light is OFF):** When the switch is off, the small trickle current flows. This current is rectified (converted from AC to DC) and used to charge a **storage capacitor** within the smart switch. This capacitor acts like a small battery, accumulating electrical energy.
- **Sustaining Power (When Light is ON):** When the light is switched ON (relay closed), the voltage across the switch itself drops to near zero. At this point, the switch's internal electronics draw their operating power directly from the **energy stored in the capacitor**. The switch is designed to be highly efficient and uses very little power, so the stored charge can sustain it for a short period.
- **Rapid Cycling for Continuous Power (Advanced/Dimmer Switches):** For more sophisticated no-neutral switches, particularly dimmers or those with continuous communication needs, they might employ a technique called "zero-crossing detection" and rapid, imperceptible switching. They might briefly (for microseconds) open the circuit many times per second (e.g., at the zero-crossing point of the AC waveform) to "steal" a tiny bit of current to recharge the capacitor, even when the light appears to be continuously on. This happens so quickly that it's not visible to the human eye and doesn't significantly affect the light's operation. This method often involves TRIACs or MOSFETs which can rapidly switch current.
- **Bypass Modules:** If a separate bypass module is used, it often contains a capacitor and a resistor. When the smart switch is off, the bypass module provides an easier path for the trickle current to flow, ensuring the smart switch gets enough power without forcing all of it through the bulb, which helps prevent flickering in sensitive LED lights. The capacitor in the bypass module can also help stabilize the current.²

Deep Dive into the Circuitry (Simplified):

- **Rectifier:** The incoming AC voltage (even the trickle current) is first passed through a rectifier (often a full-bridge rectifier) to convert it into pulsating DC.
- **Voltage Regulator:** This pulsating DC is then fed into a voltage regulator circuit (e.g., a buck converter or linear regulator) which steps down the

voltage to the low DC voltage required by the switch's microcontroller, Wi-Fi/Zigbee module, and relay coil (typically 3.3V, 5V, or 12V).

- **Storage Capacitors:** Large electrolytic capacitors are placed after the voltage regulator (and sometimes before) to smooth out the pulsating DC and provide the necessary energy storage.³ These are crucial for riding through the brief periods when the "stolen" current might be interrupted (e.g., during the "on" state or during rapid switching cycles).
- **Microcontroller (MCU):** The brain of the smart switch.⁴ It manages the communication (Wi-Fi, Zigbee, Bluetooth), processes commands, and controls the switching element.
- **Switching Element:** This is the component that actually turns the light on and off.
 - **Electromechanical Relay:** A physical switch that opens or closes. When it closes, it creates a direct path for the main current to flow to the light. These consume a burst of power to switch, but then very little to hold.
 - **TRIAC/MOSFET:** Solid-state switching devices often used in dimmers.⁵ They can precisely control the amount of AC power delivered to the light by varying the "conduction angle." They can also be used for rapid power stealing without a physical click.

In essence, the small power storage (primarily via capacitors) allows the smart switch to "sip" enough energy from the power line to keep its brains alive, even when the main light circuit is nominally "off" or when the switch itself is closed and has no voltage drop across it. This continuous, low-level power is what enables remote control and smart functionality. The ongoing challenge for manufacturers is to reduce this power draw to an absolute minimum to avoid causing perceptible effects like flickering in ever-more sensitive and low-wattage LED bulbs.