

The Conservative Weaponization of Government Against Tech

ASH JOHNSON | OCTOBER 2024

Some conservatives have grievances with “Big Tech” companies and would marshal the power of government to punish them. But the policy proposals stemming from this conservative “techlash” would have significant costs for consumers, businesses, and the economy.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Conservatives historically have viewed “big government” as the enemy, but today’s anti-tech conservatives are willing to use it as a cudgel to punish “Big Tech.”
- Anti-tech conservatives blame tech companies for corrupting children, censoring conservative viewpoints, surveilling conservative users, and wielding their market power to push left-leaning ideology.
- Despite their differences, anti-tech conservatives and many liberals propose similar solutions, such as more government regulation, more antitrust enforcement, and more liability for tech companies.
- These anti-tech solutions come with high costs for America, including economic costs, free speech restrictions, reduced ability to compete with other countries, and missing out on the benefits of technology and innovation.
- Policymakers can more effectively address the legitimate issues conservatives have raised with pro-innovation solutions that focus on maximizing the benefits and minimizing the risks associated with technology.

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INTRODUCTION

“Big government” has historically been the enemy of conservatives, with policy platforms centered around less government spending, lower taxes, and a free market economy with minimal government intervention. But for a subset of modern conservatives, a new opponent has emerged: “Big Tech.” These anti-tech conservatives accuse large tech companies of suppressing free speech, eroding traditional conservative values, corrupting America’s youth, and pushing left-leaning ideology. Many of these anti-tech conservatives are even willing to use the hammer of big government to punish Big Tech, if that is what it takes.

This conservative techlash, or backlash against large tech companies and technology more generally, arose out of real concerns.¹ Today’s children are growing up in a world that looks very different from decades past, with new opportunities as well as new risks. Additionally, the state of political discourse has fundamentally changed since the advent of social media, amplifying the voices of average Americans on platforms owned by private companies to an even greater extent than traditional media such as radio and television, which has likewise created new challenges. However, the policies anti-tech conservatives propose to solve technology-related problems—and punish Big Tech—come with significant costs for consumers, businesses, and the American economy.

There is a better way. Instead of focusing only on the potential risks associated with modern technology and ignoring the potential benefits, conservatives should focus on minimizing risks

and maximizing benefits. With this approach, conservatives can solve their problems with Big Tech while maintaining a light-touch approach in line with conservative values of small government. Most importantly, this approach comes with far fewer costs.

This report analyzes the beliefs underlying the conservative techlash. It focuses on four conservative arguments: social media is corrupting children, tech platforms censor conservative viewpoints, tech firms surveil users, and liberal tech firms have too much market power. It then presents the anti-tech solutions to these problems and their associated costs. Finally, the report recommends pro-innovation alternatives that would address conservatives' concerns while preserving many of the benefits of technology for Americans and America.

THE CONSERVATIVE TECHLASH

The core belief behind the conservative techlash is that Big Tech, or large tech companies, are colluding with other liberal institutions, including government, media, and academic institutions, to promote left-leaning ideology and silence opposition from conservatives. To anti-tech conservatives, these actions represent a threat to traditional conservative American values and need to be stopped at all costs, even if it results in bigger and more powerful government.

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative American think tank, is a major source of this narrative, though this was not always the case. Just a few years ago, Heritage was more committed to a small government approach to Big Tech.² However, as the techlash has spread from liberal to conservative circles, Heritage has changed its tune. In *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise*, Kevin Roberts provides a detailed blueprint for what it wants the next Republican president's agenda to be, anti-tech beliefs are front and center. Notable proposals include banning TikTok, taking antitrust action against Big Tech, and restricting Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, a law that shields platforms and their users for liability for third-party content.³

Heritage has also expressed its anti-tech positions in other writings. One report calls for “aggressive reforms” such as changes to antitrust law, investigations into targeted advertising practices, personal liability for Big Tech executives, restrictions to Section 230, private rights of action, and more. The report warns that absent such changes, “Big Tech will continue to erode individual liberties, segment the American citizenry, and stunt human flourishing and self-governance.”⁴ Another piece puts this more bluntly, stating, “Big Tech is an enemy of the American people.”⁵

The conservative techlash is not limited to research institutions. Multiple noteworthy conservative politicians have espoused anti-tech beliefs over the past few years, including former president and current presidential candidate Donald Trump. Trump has a history of opposing Section 230, which some conservatives view as enabling censorship by tech platforms.⁶ More recently, during his 2024 presidential campaign, Trump alluded to Big Tech companies influencing elections and “destroying” America's youth and called these companies “too big” and “too powerful,” though he stopped short of advocating for these companies' destruction, acknowledging their importance to America's ability to compete with other countries.⁷ The Trump administration also started multiple antitrust cases against and investigations into Big Tech companies.

Trump's 2024 vice-presidential candidate, Sen. J.D. Vance (R-OH), has also spoken out against Big Tech, despite his history as a former tech investor and venture capitalist. Like Trump, he has

criticized Section 230, arguing that the law gives tech platforms the power to “[deny] access to modern forms of communication for having the wrong political views.”⁸ He has also supported efforts to break up Big Tech companies and praised the current chair of the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), Lina Khan, for her aggressive antitrust stance, calling her “the best person within the Biden administration.”⁹ This “Khanservative” approach to antitrust is unfortunately growing in popularity.¹⁰

While anti-tech conservatives’ arguments for targeting Big Tech naturally rely on conservative ideals, their proposed solutions are strikingly similar to those proposed by anti-tech liberals: more antitrust enforcement, more liability for tech companies, and stricter privacy laws with private rights of action, to name a few. While conservatives and liberals frequently have opposite goals when advocating for these changes—for example, liberals want platforms to take down more speech, while conservatives want platforms to take down less speech—they have one major goal in common: Both seek to punish Big Tech for not adhering enough to their values. This retaliatory mindset harkens to banana republics, where passion and spite, rather than the rule of law, governs. Moreover, it often leads to bad policy, particularly when punishing Big Tech is weighed more heavily than other goals such as innovation, economic growth, competitiveness with China, and consumer welfare.

ANTI-TECH ARGUMENTS

This report focuses on four of the most common arguments anti-tech conservative figures and organizations make. Because anti-tech conservatives believe in stopping Big Tech at all costs, many of their proposed policies that address these four arguments would come with high costs for consumers, businesses, and the American economy—costs most Americans would likely not be willing to pay, especially if there are alternative solutions.

Table 1: Anti-tech conservative arguments and the cost of proposed solutions

Argument	Anti-tech Solution	Cost	Pro-Innovation Solution
Social media is corrupting children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ban social media for children Require children to obtain parental consent to access social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential First Amendment violations Children lose out on the many benefits of social media 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create an optional child flag Create more parental controls
Tech platforms censor conservative viewpoints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government regulation of content moderation Require equal treatment of political content Eliminate or restrict Section 230 Require interoperability between platforms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Potential First Amendment violations More censorship Less beneficial content moderation, creating a “free-for-all” Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Require transparency around content moderation Set content moderation standards

Argument	Anti-tech Solution	Cost	Pro-Innovation Solution
Tech firms surveil users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass a broad privacy law 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High economic costs Costs passed on to consumers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pass a targeted privacy law
Liberal tech firms have too much market power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Break up Big Tech firms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduced ability to compete with other countries in tech Network effects will lead to consolidation regardless Will not solve censorship concerns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follow the consumer welfare standard and avoid breakup remedies

Argument #1: Social Media Is Corrupting Children

The first argument, and the one that has made the most headway in leading to legislation, is that social media is corrupting America’s children, introducing them to left-leaning ideology, age-inappropriate content, and predatory behavior—leading to negative mental health outcomes and other forms of harm.

The primary ideological concern conservatives express regarding children on social media is exposure to LGBT-related, and particularly transgender-related, content. Heritage wrote, in an article on “How Big Tech Turns Kids Trans,” that “[t]he spike in teens using social media and identifying as transgender is no mere coincidence.”¹¹ The reasoning behind this argument is, first, that social media and other online spaces are allegedly designed to promote transgender content and censor dissenting opinions; and second, that as teens use social media, their mental health and satisfaction with life will decline, causing them to seek solutions in the form of gender transition.

Exposure to left-leaning ideology on social media is not conservatives’ only concern when it comes to children. Along with many on the left, anti-tech conservatives argue that social media exposes children to inappropriate content and harmful activity, including predatory behavior, which leads to negative mental health outcomes and even, in extreme cases, sexual exploitation. Some of the real or perceived harms conservatives see facing children on social media include predatory behavior from adults, exposure to pornography and other adult content, an increased risk of developing depression or anxiety, unrealistic body standards contributing to eating disorders, an increased risk of self-harm or suicide, substance use and abuse, and social media addiction.¹²

Speaking in support of his state’s social media ban for kids, Florida House Speaker Paul Renner called the Internet “a dark alley for our children where predators target them” and blamed social media for higher rates of depression, self-harm, and suicide.¹³ The Heritage Foundation accused social media companies of “prey[ing] on children, such as drug dealers, to get them addicted,” arguing that this addiction leads to mental illness and damages family bonds—even going so far

as to call social media companies' practices "industrial-scale child abuse."¹⁴ These claims follow a predictable pattern as old as media itself: From comic books to video games, each new form of media that becomes mainstream is followed by a wave of concern over how it is detrimental to society, and especially children.¹⁵

Anti-tech conservatives' proposed solution to social media's alleged corrupting influence on children is to ban social media for users under a certain age unless those users obtain parental consent. Multiple states—predominately red states such as Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Texas, and Utah—have passed such bans in recent years.¹⁶ A few of these laws have been challenged in court over free speech concerns, with judges blocking Arkansas's and Mississippi's bans and Utah lawmakers replacing their state's ban with less-restrictive rules requiring tech platforms to default to certain privacy settings for minors' accounts.¹⁷

Critics of these state bans argue that they are unconstitutional on two fronts. First, children have free speech rights, and requiring them to obtain parental consent to use social media violates those rights. Second, requiring adult users to verify their age in order to access social media—a process that typically involves handing over some form of government-issued identification, thereby giving up their personal information—places an unconstitutional burden on adults to exercise their free speech rights.¹⁸ This is different from requiring adults to show ID to purchase age-restricted products, such as alcohol, or enter age-restricted places, such as bars, because those activities are not inherently speech-related, whereas social media is.

While anti-tech conservatives' arguments for targeting Big Tech naturally rely on conservative ideals, their proposed solutions are strikingly similar to those proposed by anti-tech liberals.

These concerns are legitimate, but they are not the only cost of banning social media for kids. Bans also cause children to lose out on the many benefits of social media. According to the American Psychological Association (APA), which wrote in a May 2023 health advisory that "[u]sing social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful to young people," some of the benefits of social media for children include social interaction, connection to peers in similar circumstances, promotion and reinforcement of positive attitudes and behaviors, and support for members of marginalized groups.¹⁹ Rather than advocating for social media bans, APA instead recommends steps parents can take to reduce the risk of harm from social media and the next steps for researchers to better understand how social media affects children.

Additionally, there are changes social media platforms themselves continue to make to protect their young users. For example, certain platforms have separate spaces designed entirely for children, such as YouTube Kids, TikTok for Younger Users, and Instagram Teen Accounts.²⁰ Banning social media use for children under a certain age would prevent companies from continuing to innovate and create more children- and teen-friendly spaces.

Furthermore, banning social media out of concern over political bias or potential harm is a slippery slope. There are many activities that put children in harm's way, either physically or mentally. Children can get injured on playgrounds, in swimming pools and hot tubs, or by participating in sports, but lawmakers do not ban these activities because they also have benefits for children and there are less-restrictive safety measures available. Children can be exposed to

inappropriate content in books, movies, music, TV, or video games, but lawmakers do not ban these forms of media, nor should they.²¹

Meanwhile, if anti-tech conservatives believe social media exposes young people to too much left-leaning ideology, they should take the same approach they have taken to other industries. For example, some conservatives accuse Hollywood of being biased in favor of liberal views.²² But no red states have banned children from going to the movies without parental consent. The only reason social media has received different treatment is because it is a relatively new technology, leading many to panic over its potential impact on society.²³ However, regulating out of panic will not lead to effective policy solutions. A more balanced approach would continue to allow children to benefit from social media while giving them and their parents more control over their online experience.

Argument #2: Tech Platforms Censor Conservative Viewpoints

The second argument, which has also resulted in legislation, is that major tech platforms are left-leaning and collude with other left-leaning institutions to remove conservative speech and ban conservative viewers.

There are many examples of conservatives making this argument, but one that stands out is the Hunter Biden laptop story. In short, the *New York Post*, a conservative news outlet, published a story in October 2020 breaking the news of content on a laptop belonging to Hunter Biden, son of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden, including emails to a top executive at a Ukrainian energy firm, sexually explicit images and videos, and a video depicting illicit drug use.²⁴ After the story was published, Twitter suspended the *Post*'s account and barred anyone from tweeting the story or sending it via direct message, labeling it “hacked material.”²⁵ This led many conservatives to accuse Twitter of censorship and election interference.²⁶ Then-CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, along with other former executives involved in the decision, later admitted that this decision was “wrong.”²⁷

Another major example of alleged censorship came in the wake of the January 6 protest on the Capitol, which led most major social media platforms—including Facebook, Twitter (now X), YouTube, Instagram, Snapchat, and more—to ban or suspend Trump’s accounts for inciting violence and to remove communities or hashtags associated with Trump and skepticism of the 2020 presidential election results.²⁸ These bans and suspensions led to a debate over whether tech platforms should remove the accounts of democratically elected officials or candidates for office, particularly in high-ranking positions such as the presidency, and whether doing so posed a risk to democracy.²⁹

In addition, following January 6, Apple and Google removed the conservative social media platform Parler from their app stores, and Amazon Web Services removed the website from its cloud hosting services, with all three companies citing concerns over violent content.³⁰ These actions intensified conservatives’ censorship concerns, highlighting that not only could individual platforms remove conservative users and content, but app stores and hosting services could remove entire apps and websites that catered to conservatives.

These are far from the only examples. Many prominent conservative figures, media outlets, and institutions have faced social media bans or suspensions.³¹ Additionally, all the American elected officials who have been banned or suspended from social media platforms as of March 2023

were Republicans.³² Conservatives also point to tech platforms removing certain opinions on divisive topics, such as transgender issues, critical race theory, and COVID-19, or labeling these opinions as “misinformation.”³³

There are multiple proposed solutions to tech platforms’ alleged bias. The first proposed solution, which Florida and Texas attempted in 2021, is government regulation of content moderation. Florida passed S.B. 7072, a law that fines social media platforms \$250,000 per day for deplatforming any political candidate running for statewide office and \$25,000 per day for deplatforming any other political candidate. The law also allows Floridian users to sue social media platforms for censoring or deplatforming them.³⁴ Meanwhile, Texas’s H.B. 20 prohibits large social media platforms from censoring users, defined as “to block, ban, remove, deplatform, demonetize, de-boost, restrict, deny equal access or visibility to, or otherwise discriminate against expression, and allows Texan users to sue platforms for violations.”³⁵

Technology industry groups NetChoice and the Computer and Communications Industry Association (CCIA) challenged both laws in court, citing First Amendment concerns. Social media platforms are private actors with First Amendment rights to freedom of expression and association, which includes the freedom to disassociate themselves from certain forms of speech—such as speech that violates a platform’s terms of service—and individuals who regularly engage in those forms of speech. Thus, by punishing social media platforms for removing certain content or users, NetChoice and CCIA argued that the Florida and Texas state governments were violating those platforms’ First Amendment rights.³⁶

Repealing Section 230 would likely lead to less free speech online, not more. If tech platforms were liable for third-party content, they would have to further restrict the types of content they allow.

Court orders have prevented Florida’s and Texas’s laws from going into effect. The Supreme Court ruled on both laws in the case of *Moody v. NetChoice* in July 2024, remanding the cases to the Fifth Circuit Court and instructing it and Eleventh Circuit Court to consider the laws’ First Amendment implications in their review.³⁷

An alternative proposal would specifically require tech platforms to treat all political content equally. However, this similarly runs afoul of platforms’ First Amendment rights. Platforms may not want to associate themselves with certain extreme beliefs on either side of the political spectrum. Not only would platforms risk alienating users by allowing certain extreme beliefs, they would also risk alienating advertisers, which many platforms rely on in order to continue offering their services for free or at a low cost to users. Importantly, it is within platforms’ rights to choose to associate with or disassociate from certain beliefs.

Another proposed solution to tech platforms’ alleged bias is to repeal or restrict Section 230 to limit or remove platforms’ intermediary liability protections, which some conservatives see as enabling platforms’ censorship—compared with some liberals, who see Section 230 as enabling a lack of censorship. Republicans in Congress have introduced multiple bills that would either repeal Section 230 or change the language of the law to make platforms liable if they remove content that does not meet certain criteria, such as being obscene, violent, harassing, or illegal.³⁸

Repealing Section 230 would likely lead to less free speech online, not more. If tech platforms were liable for third-party content, they would have to further restrict the types of content they allow by enforcing stricter standards to avoid the possibility of users posting or sharing potentially illegal content. This could lead to “collateral censorship,” a form of self-censorship that occurs “when *A* censors *B* out of fear that the government will hold *A* liable for the effects of *B*’s speech.”³⁹ In other words, platforms would err on the side of removing more content, even if that content is permissible, rather than risk leaving up content that could land them in legal trouble. They could even ban entire categories of speech, such as political speech, or categories of users.

Limiting the types of speech platforms can remove without risking liability poses the opposite problem, as doing so would change the incentive for platforms when moderating content. Currently, platforms have more freedom to remove content they consider to be potentially harmful to their users, but under a higher standard, platforms may raise their standards for content removal and choose not to remove some potentially harmful content. While this change may seem like a win for conservatives who want platforms to remove less conservative speech, in practice, it would make the Internet a far more hostile environment for users, including children. Platforms would be less likely to remove forms of content that fall into the gray area of being harmful but not illegal, including foreign disinformation, fake news, harassment, spam, and clear hate speech.

Finally, another proposed solution to allegations that mainstream tech platforms are biased against conservatives is requiring interoperability between platforms. The aim of this requirement would be to allow competing social media platforms to interconnect, ensuring that users can communicate across platforms. In other words, X would have to allow Parler users to make posts or send messages and vice versa without users having to create separate accounts for each service. This would function similar to email: There are no barriers in place preventing someone with a Gmail account from emailing someone with an Outlook account, even though each person uses a different email provider.

This type of interoperability requirement would make it virtually impossible to effectively deplatform misbehaving users, unless all platforms followed the same rules regarding banning or suspending users, as banned or suspended users could always join a new platform. Kicking users off X would be meaningless if they could still make posts and send messages from Parler. Although this approach would solve conservatives’ concerns with conservative users being deplatformed, it creates new problems by restricting platforms from creating their own rules for what content and activity is or is not permissible, allowing bad actors to escape consequences for breaking a platform’s rules, and opening users of any platform to potentially unwelcome content and activity from users of other platforms.

Argument #3: Tech Firms Surveil Users

The third argument is that tech firms surveil users, which is of concern to conservatives for multiple reasons. Many tech firms collect data about users to recommend content and deliver targeted ads. However, conservatives argue that tech firms also monitor users to counter and control extremism, and that this surveillance often leads social media platforms to label their viewpoints as extremist and targeting them. Additionally, conservatives express concerns over tech firms sharing Americans’ data with China.

To the first point, Heritage wrote, “Tools originally created for legitimate purposes are poised to be weaponized against a subset of American citizens. The next phase [of digital surveillance] will likely consist of broadening the fight against domestic extremism to include suppressing conservative content.”⁴⁰ The organization points to Google co-founder Sergey Brin comparing Trump voters to “extremists” in a leaked video of a Google employee meeting.⁴¹ “They will not stop with child safety or strict counterterrorism,” Heritage wrote, warning that left-leaning tech companies will repurpose child safety and counterterrorism tools to surveil and censor conservatives.⁴²

Second, anti-tech conservatives are concerned with the influence of China on dominant tech companies. Chinese-owned social media platform TikTok is the clearest example of this influence, leading many conservatives and even some liberals to call for banning the app in the United States. This effort culminated in Congress passing a law in April 2024 giving ByteDance, developer of TikTok, a year to divest TikTok’s U.S. assets or face a ban.⁴³ However, TikTok is not the only company anti-tech conservatives accuse of getting in bed with the Communist Party of China (CCP). Heritage has accused all of America’s largest tech firms of “funneling data about Americans to the CCP” and letting the CCP “censor Chinese users on their platforms” and “set their corporate policies” in exchange for “cheap labor and regulatory special treatment.”⁴⁴

Proponents of a private right of action frame it as a gift to consumers, providing them with access to remedies against organizations that have violated their privacy. However, even in the case of legitimate privacy lawsuits, the payouts are often small and attorney fees are often high.

Anti-tech conservatives who believe tech companies use digital surveillance tools against American users, and particularly conservative Americans, may be more likely to support passing a broad federal privacy law that comes with high costs for American businesses, consumers, and the economy. To be clear, no privacy law will stop companies from having some amount of data about their consumers—the mere act of making a transaction or signing up for a service requires turning over some data—but a broader privacy law would place harsher restrictions on the use of data. For example, Heritage supports a federal data privacy framework that would require consumers to affirmatively opt in to data sharing, as opposed to giving consumers the ability to opt out.⁴⁵

Opt-in consent requirements lead fewer users to share their data because most users select the default option of not giving consent, often for irrational reasons. Additionally, obtaining opt-in consent costs significantly more than an opt-out system, wherein users can revoke consent to have their data collected. Given the thin margins involved in data-related transactions such as targeted advertising, companies would likely pass these costs onto consumers, either directly or indirectly.⁴⁶ Opt-in consent requirements assume more data collection is harmful, ignoring the many ways data can improve many facets of Americans’ everyday life, from health care and transportation to education and agriculture. Data collection even benefits users on an individual level by enabling tech platforms to show users content they are more likely to enjoy.

Another key feature of a broad privacy law that some anti-tech conservatives support is a private right of action, which allows users to sue organizations directly for civil penalties.⁴⁷ A private right of action is by far the most expensive provision a federal privacy law could contain. The

Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) estimated the annual cost of duplicative enforcement mechanisms would be \$2.7 billion annually in enforcement if a federal data privacy law included a broad private right of action, whereas a more targeted law with no private right of action would cost approximately \$210 million.⁴⁸

Proponents of a private right of action frame it as a gift to consumers, providing them with access to remedies against organizations that have violated their privacy. However, even in the case of legitimate privacy lawsuits, the payouts are often small and attorney fees are often high. Ultimately, privacy lawyers are the only group that would significantly benefit from a broad private right of action.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, the economy would suffer as the high cost of litigation dramatically drives up costs for organizations that handle personal data, diverting funds away from innovating and creating new products and services. Consumers would also suffer as organizations pass these costs along to them by driving up prices, charging for services that were previously free, or offering discounts less frequently.

Argument #4: Liberal Tech Firms Have Too Much Market Power

The fourth and final argument is that major tech companies are left-leaning and have too much power to control speech in America, to the detriment of conservatives. Heritage has accused Big Tech firms of “abusing dominant positions in the market” and “taking advantage of a landscape that has been skewed ... to favor their business models over those of their competitors.”⁵⁰ In a private meeting with other conservatives, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis reportedly called for breaking up Big Tech companies, saying that “they’re just too big, they have too much power,” they are “ruining our country,” and “they’re exercising a more negative influence on our society than the trusts that got broken up at the early 20th century,” referring to trusts such as Standard Oil.⁵¹

These alleged negative influences are twofold. First, anti-tech conservatives believe that allowing left-leaning tech companies to dominate the market, particularly when it comes to controlling online speech, is detrimental to conservatives and conservative start-ups. For example, Vance called for breaking up Google, arguing that “monopolistic control of information in our society resides with an explicitly progressive technology company.”⁵² Many conservatives also argue that Apple and Google taking conservative social media start-up Parler off their app stores and Amazon removing it from its cloud hosting service were anti-competitive actions that demonstrated major firms’ control over the market. Parler CEO John Matze accused Amazon of trying to “completely remove free speech off the internet” and called Apple a “software monopoly.”⁵³

Anti-tech conservatives’ proposed solution to Big Tech’s market power is to break up these firms. However, there are multiple reasons why this approach is unlikely to address conservatives’ censorship concerns or worries over Chinese influence. To begin, none of the ongoing antitrust cases against Big Tech—investigations that all began, notably, during the Trump administration—are meaningfully related to concerns surrounding the censorship of conservative speech.⁵⁴ There is a reason why censorship allegations don’t constitute a viable antitrust claim: A platform refusing to deal with a content provider does not run afoul of the antitrust laws unless there is some exclusion of a competitor, which is not the case when it comes to a platform simply unilaterally removing content it doesn’t compete with.

Similarly, structural antitrust remedies are unlikely to deal with alleged censorship issues meaningfully. The size of the large platforms is driven by economies of scale and, in particular, network effects. Social media is just that: social. Users flock to the same platforms their friends, family, colleagues, and communities use. As such, breaking up X, for example, into two companies—X and “Y”—would only last so long before users would default to one platform over the other.

In addition to this type of “horizontal” breakup, some conservatives have taken aim at vertical integration by Big Tech, such as Google search and YouTube being under the same company. But here again, a solution preventing this type of vertical integration—forcing Google to divest YouTube—would not only come at the expense of efficiency and economies of scope, but also similarly do little in practice to address conservatives’ concerns about censorship. That is, if conservatives are right in that the technology space is a bastion of liberal values, divesting YouTube from Google would be much more likely to create two liberal companies than to create one conservative and one liberal. The reality is a large share of corporate America has adopted what conservatives would call liberal social values. To the extent Big Tech does this, they are not the anomaly.

While Xi Jinping, FTC Chair Lina Khan, and anti-tech conservatives all appear to share the goal of preventing American Big Tech and the rest of corporate America from achieving the scale and dynamism needed to win globally, it is only China that ultimately wins.

Amidst an ongoing technology race in key areas such as artificial intelligence and robotics, the scale enjoyed by large American technology companies is essential to underwrite the billions of dollars in investments needed for the next-generation innovations that will keep the West technologically on top. The hour is already later than many realize: As of 2020, China was the leading producer in 7 of the 10 strategically important industries in ITIF’s Hamilton Index, which assesses national performance in the competition for advanced industries.⁵⁵

China, ever the “fast follower,” also recognizes how antitrust policy can further its ends. For example, while China is busy scaling up its own technology firms through mergers and state subsidies, China’s antitrust regulator “is holding back its required green light for mergers that involve American companies as a technology war with Washington intensifies.”⁵⁶ All the while, the Biden administration has issued its own merger guidelines, which create further roadblocks for U.S. firms seeking to gain scale. In other words, while China’s Xi Jinping, FTC Chair Lina Khan, and anti-tech conservatives all appear to share the goal of preventing American Big Tech and the rest of corporate America from achieving the scale and dynamism needed to win globally, it is only China that ultimately wins.⁵⁷

PRO-INNOVATION SOLUTIONS

There are alternative solutions to the problems some conservatives have with technology and large tech companies. As opposed to the anti-tech approach, which would cut Americans off from many of the benefits of technology—including technology-driven innovation and economic growth—a pro-innovation and pro-tech approach would focus on minimizing the risks associated with technology while maximizing the benefits.

Children on Social Media

First, to address concerns that social media is corrupting children, Congress should pass legislation requiring device operating systems to create an opt-in “trustworthy child flag” for user accounts, available when first setting up a device and later in a device’s settings, that signals to apps and websites—including social media platforms—that a user is underaged and requiring apps and websites that serve age-restricted content to check for this signal for their users and block underaged users from this content.⁵⁸

This approach would serve as a less invasive alternative to age verification. Rather than using ID checks to determine whether to activate this child flag option, parents could activate or disable it depending on their own values and the maturity of their children. Additionally, devices could default to certain parental controls recommended for children. Because this approach does not require anyone to disclose or verify their identity, it does not create privacy risks by forcing users to share their government IDs or allowing online services to link their online activity to their offline identities. It is also a low-impact approach, allowing adults to continue using the Internet as they do today.

Congress should pass legislation requiring device operating systems to create an opt-in “trustworthy child flag” for user accounts.

Congress should require tech platforms to not only create a child flag, but also develop interoperable parental controls that allow parents to easily manage their children’s online safety and privacy across multiple platforms, giving parents sufficient oversight of their children’s online activity. These controls should be easy to access, set up, and change. In order to ensure parents understand how to effectively use these tools when they are available, Congress should also provide funding for digital literacy initiatives that teach parents how to keep their children safe online.

Censorship and Bias

To address concerns over bias and censorship on tech platforms, Congress should pass legislation setting transparency requirements for these platforms’ content moderation decisions. This is a point of agreement between the pro-innovation and anti-tech crowd, as transparency requirements are also outlined as a solution in Heritage’s *Mandate for Leadership*.⁵⁹ Congress should require platforms to clearly describe what content and behavior are allowed and not allowed, how they enforce those rules, and how users can appeal moderation decisions. Additionally, the law should require platforms to enforce their rules consistently and create an appeals process for content moderation decisions wherever one does not already exist.

To further increase transparency surrounding content moderation, Congress should require platforms to release publicly accessible annual reports, including data on how many and what types of rule-breaking content and behavior companies removed from the platforms, how many of those decisions were appealed by users, and how many of those appeals were successful.

Additionally, the United States should take the lead in establishing a multistakeholder forum to develop a set of voluntary, consensus-based guidelines for tech platforms to follow when moderating online political speech. These guidelines should create common definitions of

different types of harmful content and establish best practices for classifying and responding to such content based on evidenced-based research. For example, these guidelines should specify the types of information platforms should provide to users about content that is removed, labeled, de-monetized, or otherwise restricted on their platforms, as well as the type of redress and appeals mechanisms they should put in place to allow users to appeal decisions.

Similarly, these guidelines should specify recommended oversight mechanisms to ensure fair and equitable enforcement of rules and offer details on what types of special accounts platforms should recognize, such as for elected officials, and how to make those determinations. Finally, these guidelines should create a process for designating trusted flaggers—or third parties that reliably classify harmful content—platforms can use to improve their content moderation.⁶⁰

Congress should set transparency requirements for platforms' content moderation decisions.

Instead of shifting the burden of resolving problems related to online speech and censorship entirely on industry or government, this approach would bring together various stakeholders around solutions that foster trust, increase transparency, and mitigate threats. There are limits to what tech companies can do on their own because policymakers and the public often do not trust that these companies are acting in the public interest. And there are limits to what policymakers can achieve on their own due to partisan disagreements and because legislative restrictions on content moderation raise free speech concerns. Finally, proposed structural and technical changes to social media would likely not only fail to resolve free speech concerns, but also likely make things worse.

Data Privacy

To address privacy concerns, Congress should pass a comprehensive federal data privacy law that sets a national standard for consumer data protection and preempts state and local governments from passing their own laws that would add to or subtract from these protections. Doing so would create a consistent set of rules for all U.S. organizations to follow, minimizing confusion and costs. The law should be based on a standard of tangible consumer harm when assessing penalties, creating a system of incentives to promote desirable behavior while discouraging undesirable behavior in a way that limits compliance costs and avoids restricting productivity and innovation.

Congress should pass a comprehensive federal data privacy law that sets a national standard for consumer data protection and preempts state and local governments.

Any federal privacy law should avoid creating a private right of action that would unnecessarily expose companies to substantial legal costs, forcing them to focus more on fighting meritless lawsuits and less on designing safe and innovative products and services for consumers. Additionally, federal privacy legislation should only require organizations to obtain affirmative (opt-in) consent if they are collecting sensitive personal data, such as health or financial data. Organizations collecting nonsensitive personal data should be required to adhere to an opt-out standard or should only be required to provide notice and choice. Doing so would reduce both

the compliance costs and the hidden costs associated with obtaining opt-in consent in most cases while still increasing transparency around data collection and giving users greater control.

Overall, a more targeted federal data privacy law would cost \$6 billion per year, 95 percent less than a broad, General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-style law, which would cost \$122 billion annually.⁶¹ This includes both compliance costs and additional “hidden” costs that represent the economic impact of lower consumer efficiency, lower productivity, opportunity costs from less access to data, and lower ad effectiveness.⁶² A more targeted federal data privacy law would enshrine important consumer privacy rights, prevent real privacy harms, preempt inconsistent state laws, and minimize the impact on productivity and innovation. This approach would strike a balance that benefits consumers and businesses and allows the data-driven Internet economy to continue to thrive.

Antitrust

Under the Biden administration, the FTC and Department of Justice have taken a new approach to antitrust, straying from the guidelines and principles of previous administrations that the antitrust laws are fundamentally a “consumer welfare proscription.” That is, whereas modern antitrust standards prioritize protecting consumers and curbing monopolistic behavior, this new approach focuses on protecting competitors and preserving deconcentrated market structures in order to protect democracy. Indeed, these “neo-Brandeisians” are inherently skeptical of digital markets by virtue of network effects they believe lead to dominance. As a result, they seek to use antitrust law to break up Big Tech firms even if their conduct does not harm consumers.⁶³

This approach to antitrust would undermine innovation and economic growth, discouraging investment and development at a time when the United States is already struggling to stay competitive, particularly against China. America’s history of high-tech antitrust experience suggests a cautious approach: The biggest high-tech antitrust cases thus far have all either proved to be ill founded and likely to have serious adverse consequences if there are ultimately breakups.⁶⁴ For example, despite cases against IBM and AT&T in the 1980s, it was changing technology, not antitrust intervention, that led to changes in the industry. In contrast, requiring dominant tech companies to modify certain carefully selected business practices, such as in the landmark *U.S. v. Microsoft* case, or other solutions such as adhering to a federal privacy law or implementing transparency requirements, is a better way to help the digital world move forward.⁶⁵

Rather than sweeping breakups and divestments, government oversight should focus on particular business practices and complaints.

Today’s claims that five companies—Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft—are unassailable monopolies are almost self-refuting, especially as these firms increasingly compete with each other and face stiffening competition from China and others.⁶⁶ It might seem justified and tempting to separate Amazon’s retail and cloud computing businesses; breaking up Alphabet into search, email, Android, YouTube, and other businesses; or demand that Meta divest Instagram, WhatsApp, or both. But these decisions would cause significant disruption, job loss, and loss of shareholder value, as well as create a chilling effect on innovation and very likely reduce consumer welfare, given that not only are most of these services free, but consumers also

benefit from network effects that allow them to easily connect with many people on these services.

Rather than sweeping breakups and divestments, government oversight should focus on particular business practices and complaints. Targeted behavioral remedies are sometimes justified—and if done well, they can result in increased competition. However, as in the past, the biggest transformations will come not from antitrust interventions but from shifts in technology and the marketplace. Policymakers need to be both humble about how much they should do and very smart about how to do it. This has never been an easy task, and it will not get any easier going forward. Faced with a rising China and the massive investments needed for the future, America’s digital economy needs to be nudged forward, not dismantled. History shows that doing too much is riskier than doing too little.

CONCLUSION

Anti-tech conservatives have legitimate concerns regarding children’s safety and well-being, online free speech, and mistakes made by major tech companies. However, instead of using big government as a sledgehammer against Big Tech, conservatives can address their concerns while maintaining traditional conservative principles of minimal government intervention and a free market economy. Importantly, these targeted solutions come with far fewer costs to American businesses, consumers, and the economy than the anti-tech solutions some conservatives propose.

About the Author

Ash Johnson (@ashljnsn) is a senior policy manager at ITIF specializing in Internet policy issues including privacy, security, platform regulation, e-government, and accessibility for people with disabilities. Her insights appear in numerous prominent media outlets such as TIME, The Washington Post, NPR, BBC, and Bloomberg.

Previously, Johnson worked at Software.org: the BSA Foundation, focusing on diversity in the tech industry and STEM education. She holds a master’s degree in security policy from The George Washington University and a bachelor’s degree in sociology from Brigham Young University.

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