

Florida lawmakers challenge Silicon Valley over 'censorship'

February 3 2021, by Bobby Caina Calvin



In this Thursday, Oct. 17, 2019, file photo, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg speaks at Georgetown University, in Washington. Florida lawmakers, including Gov. Ron DeSantis, intensified their battle with Facebook, Twitter and Silicon Valley when they announced new proposals Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021, aimed at reigning in platforms they accuse of squelching the free speech of conservatives. On a call with analysts the week before, Zuckerberg said the social media giant was attempting to "turn down the temperature and discourage divisive conversations and communities." (AP Photo/Nick Wass, File)

Florida lawmakers, including Gov. Ron DeSantis, intensified their battle with Facebook, Twitter and Silicon Valley when they announced new proposals Tuesday aimed at reigning in platforms they accuse of squelching the free speech of conservatives.

"Over the years, these platforms have changed from neutral platforms that provide Americans with the freedom to speak to enforcers of preferred narratives," the governor said Tuesday during a news conference at the Florida Capitol.

Social [media](#) companies have been simultaneously praised and condemned in recent weeks as they cracked down on inciteful posts they said could foment further violence after the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Conservatives have long accused [social media companies](#) and other [tech giants](#) of harboring bias against them. Republicans in other states are considering similar bills that push back against social media giants they deem unfriendly.

"Florida is taking back the virtual public square as a place where information and ideas can flow freely. We're demanding transparency from the big tech giants," state House Speaker Chris Sprowls said.

About four in every five Americans—some 250 million people—have profiles on social media. Those with substantial followings, including elected officials, celebrities and other public figures, have platforms they can readily deploy to amplify their messaging.

On a call with analysts last week, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg said the social media giant was attempting to "turn down the temperature

and discourage divisive conversations and communities." He added that "people don't want politics and fighting to take over their experience on our services."

Amazon booted Parler off its web-hosting service five days after the Capitol insurrection. It said in court filings that it did so as a last resort to keep Parler from being used as a venue to disseminate plans for disrupting government and last month's inauguration of President Joe Biden.

A [federal judge](#) in Seattle later ruled Amazon would not be required to restore web service to Parler, an online social media [platform](#) that mostly attracts conservatives and supporters of former President Donald Trump.

The moves by Florida lawmakers may end up being mere political theater because it's uncertain if the state would have the authority to act on companies with such national and global reach. In fact, the federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 shields internet companies from many legal challenges.

Legal experts say states and other local jurisdictions have a high bar in justifying regulations that might infringe on free speech issues—but the matter could be ripe for a national discussion on how to regulate Internet companies, according to Clay Calvert, a first amendment expert at the University of Florida's law school.



In this Monday, Aug. 31, 2020, file photo, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis speaks during a news conference at the University of South Florida Morsani College of Medicine and Heart Institute in Tampa, Fla. Florida lawmakers, including DeSantis, intensified their battle with Facebook, Twitter and Silicon Valley when they announced new proposals Tuesday, Feb. 2, 2021, aimed at reigning in platforms they accuse of squelching the free speech of conservatives. (AP Photo/Chris O'Meara, File)

Besides, he said, "do we want a crazy quilt of state regulations or do we want uniform rules adopted on the federal level?"

State Senate President Wilton Simpson suggested that the federal arena may be the proper venue for regulating tech companies.

"There's not much we can do as a state. But we need Congress to act on a nationwide basis," he said.

"The big tech companies have the duty to allow differing views on their public platforms. No one should be excluded," Simpson said. "But let's be clear: They are targeting conservatives."

He said it amounts to political censorship.

One proposal in the state Senate would force Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms to give users a month's notice before their accounts are disabled or suspended. The bill was filed after Twitter suspended Trump's account after his supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol.

Another proposal that was to be filed Tuesday would prohibit companies from suspending the account of a political candidate and be subject to a fine of \$100,000 for each day the account of a statewide candidate is blocked, or \$10,000 a day for other office seekers.

The proposal also would allow consumers to sue if they've been treated unfairly and would authorize the state attorney general to take on the country's largest tech companies for anti-competitive practices. Social media companies would be required to reveal how they became aware of any content they censor.

"We're definitely at a boiling point," said Darrell West, the vice president of governance studies at the Brookings Institution. "Most of these issues have come up just in the last year, as social media platforms have become more aggressive about regulating their own space."

While Republicans lawmakers assert bias against conservative thought, a New York University study released Monday concludes that is a baseless

claim.

"Conservatives are drawn to the established platforms for the same reason liberals are: That's where you can reach the largest audiences and enjoy the benefits of the network effect," said the study's authors.

"And as much as they condemn supposed [social media](#) favoritism," the authors continued, "conservatives appear to relish wielding the bias-claim cudgel, even though it's based on distortions and falsehoods."

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