

Google is losing allies across the political spectrum

Antitrust sentiment grows, so does skepticism about Google on both the left and the right.

[Timothy B. Lee](#) -



Google Executive Chairman Eric Schmidt.

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Eight years ago, Google was on top of the world. People across the political spectrum saw the search giant as a symbol of high-tech innovation. During the just-completed 2008 presidential campaign cycle, candidates as diverse as Ron Paul, John McCain, and Barack Obama had all made pilgrimages to Google's Mountain View headquarters to burnish their reputations for tech savvy.

Even better, Google soon had a close relationship to the newly elected president, Barack Obama. "Google was riding high on the fact that Eric Schmidt was campaigning for Obama," said Siva Vaidhyanathan, a media studies professor at the University of Virginia and a longtime Google critic. "There was a lot of attention paid in the press to the fact that Googlers were starting to work in the White House."

With so many Googlers in government, Google had an outsized influence on policymaking during the Obama years. But today, Google is in a different situation. Most obviously, Schmidt [worked hard](#) to get Hillary Clinton elected president, and Clinton lost.

The issues don't end there. Given Silicon Valley's liberal views on social issues and Schmidt's love for Democratic politicians, it was probably inevitable that conservatives would sour on the search giant.

But the larger problem for the search giant is that the company has been losing support among Democrats as well.

A growing number of liberal thinkers believes that the concentration of corporate power was a major problem in the American economy. And few companies exemplify that concentration more than Google.

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[Google-funded think tank fires prominent Google critic](#)

That's the real significance of this week's decision by the New America Foundation, a think tank that's heavily funded by Google, to [fire the head of its Open Markets project](#). For the last eight years, the Open Markets team has been methodically building the intellectual case for more aggressive enforcement of antitrust laws—a project that could easily result in more regulatory scrutiny of Google.

Google is in no immediate danger on that front. Republicans are still largely committed to a hands-off approach to economic regulation, Democrats are out of power, and Google still has plenty of allies in the Democratic Party.

But the longer-term trajectory here could be ominous. The combination of Bernie Sanders-style populism on the left and Donald Trump-style populism on the right could lead to a future where Google faces hostility from policymakers across parties.

"There's been a really big breakthrough," says Barry Lynn, who led New America's Open Markets team before New America fired him. "It's not just the left. Interest in dealing with concentration of power, the fear of concentration of power is across the spectrum."

Conservatives are increasingly hostile to Google

Conservative skepticism of Google goes back to the early years of the Obama administration. At the time, Vaidhyathan was working on a book, criticizing Google, that came out in 2011. While promoting the book, he said, he kept getting invited on talk radio—what he describes as "angry white guy shows."

"For a couple of weeks they were really interested in Google and their relationship with Obama," Vaidhyathan told Ars. "And it turned out that Glenn Beck had done one of his chalk board drawings connecting George Soros to Eric Schmidt and Sergey Brin."

Vaidhyathan is generally a Google critic, but he found himself in the unusual position of defending Google against unfounded conspiracy theories. Still, there really was a close relationship between Google and the Obama White House. And that relationship—and Schmidt's subsequent support for Hillary Clinton—started to drive a wedge between Google and grassroots conservatives.

Further Reading

[Google fires engineer who “crossed the line” with diversity memo](#)

Conservative skepticism of Google has only intensified in 2017. The [high-profile August firing](#) of James Damore was one key moment here. Damore wrote a controversial memo suggesting that Google's gender gap might be explained by women having less interest in or aptitude for software engineering, and the former employee argued that Google was becoming an "ideological echo chamber" where right-of-center views weren't welcome.

When Google terminated Damore, many conservatives argued that Google proved Damore's point. Conservative critics believed that Damore's arguments should have been taken seriously within Google and that Google was essentially signalling that conservative viewpoints were not welcome at Mountain View.

Another flashpoint came later in the month, when Google canceled the domain name of the neo-Nazi site the Daily Stormer and [booted a right-wing Twitter competitor called Gab](#) from the Android app store. While few conservatives have sympathy for Nazis, conservatives worry that similar reasoning could lead to censorship by Google and other technology giants of more mainstream speech.

Further Reading

[Google explains why it banned the app for Gab, a right-wing Twitter rival](#)

That has led to the unusual spectacle of conservatives calling for government regulation of a major American company. "Since it has the power to censor the Internet, Google should be regulated like the public utility it is, to make sure it doesn't further distort the free flow of information to the rest of us," Fox News host [Tucker Carlson argued](#).

"The evidence of Silicon Valley's hostility to the Right is everywhere," [wrote Jeremy Carl](#), a researcher at the conservative Hoover Institution. Like Carlson, Carl made the case for treating Google and other Silicon Valley companies like public utilities.

To be clear, this is still very much a minority view on the right. Most conservative policy experts still favor the deregulatory point of view Republicans have advocated since the Reagan years.

Frank Pasquale, a legal scholar at the University of Maryland, points out that, despite using some anti-monopoly rhetoric on the campaign trail, Donald Trump has relied more on orthodox free-market conservatives in the White House. Former Federal Trade Commissioner Josh Wright, a skeptic of strict antitrust enforcement, served on the Trump transition team. And Trump's choice to lead the antitrust division of the Justice Department, Makan Delrahim, is expected to [enforce antitrust law less aggressively](#) than his Obama administration predecessors. While candidate Trump sometimes hinted he would declare war on major technology companies, there has been no sign so far that he's going to follow through on those promises.

But over the longer term, political rhetoric has a way of transforming into political action. If hostility toward Google and other Silicon Valley giants becomes widespread among conservatives, sooner or later Republican politicians will find ways to capitalize on that. The next Republican president might campaign on the same kind of anti-monopoly rhetoric Trump did but actually follow through with it in office.

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