

AP-GfK poll: Strong opposition to in-flight calls

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In this Oct. 29, 2012, file photo, a traveler on Delta Airlines waits for her flight in Detroit. As federal regulators consider removing a decades-old prohibition on making phone calls on planes, a majority of air travelers oppose such a change, a new Associated Press poll finds on Wednesday, Dec. 11, 2013. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel, File)

As federal regulators consider removing a decades-old prohibition on making phone calls on planes, a majority of Americans who fly oppose

such a change, a new Associated Press-GfK poll finds.

The Federal Communications Commission will officially start the debate Thursday, holding the first of several meetings to review the agency's 22-year-old ban. New FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler has called the current rules "outdated and restrictive."

Technology has advanced to the point where in-flight calls—relayed first through a special system on planes—won't overload cell towers on the ground. As a result, Wheeler has said, there's no reason the government should prohibit in-flight calls. The FCC proposal comes weeks after the Federal Aviation Administration lifted its ban on using personal electronic devices such as iPads and Kindles below 10,000 feet (3,000 meters), saying they don't interfere with cockpit instruments.

Just because technology has advanced, it doesn't mean that etiquette has. Many fliers fear their fellow passengers will subject them to long-winded conversations impossible to avoid at 35,000 feet (10,700 meters).

The Associated Press-GfK poll released Wednesday finds that 48 percent of Americans oppose allowing cellphones to be used for [voice calls](#) while flying; just 19 percent support it. Another 30 percent are neutral.

Among those who fly, opposition is stronger. Looking just at Americans who have taken more than one flight in the past year, 59 percent are against allowing calls on planes. That number grows to 78 percent among those who've taken four or more flights.

Interestingly, you can count Wheeler in the opposition. "We understand that many passengers would prefer that voice calls not be made on airplanes. I feel that way myself," he said in a Nov. 22 statement.

The chairman went on to say that his intention is for the airlines—not the government—to make the decision whether or not to allow calls.

Delta Air Lines is the only airline to explicitly state that it won't allow voice calls. Delta says years of feedback from customers show "the overwhelming sentiment" is to keep the ban in place. American Airlines, United Airlines and JetBlue Airways all plan to study the issue and listen to feedback from passengers and crew.

The nation's largest flight attendant union opposes a change, saying cellphone use could lead to fights between passengers.

Most Middle East airlines and a few in Asia and Europe already allow voice calls on planes.

Before the FCC commissioners can even meet Thursday afternoon, they must go to Capitol Hill to answer questions about the change.

House Communications and Technology Subcommittee Chairman Greg Walden has called all five commissioners to a hearing on the matter.

Walden said Wednesday that "allowing cellphones on planes sounds like the premise of a new reality show: 'Cage Fighting at 30,000 Feet.'"

Separately, House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Bill Shuster plans to introduce a bill prohibiting such calls.

"If passengers are going to be forced to listen to the gossip in the aisle seat, it's going to make for a very long flight," Shuster said in a statement.

In contrast to the negative sentiment about [phone calls](#), many take a favorable view of the lifting of the ban on [personal electronic devices](#).

The poll shows that 43 percent of Americans support the FAA's move, while 19 percent oppose it. Another 37 percent are neutral. Among frequent fliers, support rises to 69 percent.

The AP-GfK Poll was conducted Dec. 5-9, 2013 using KnowledgePanel, GfK's probability-based online panel. For results based on all 1,367 adults, the margin of sampling error is plus or minus 3.5 percentage points. It is 5.4 points for results among 560 people who have taken at least one flight in the last year.

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Online:

AP-GfK Poll: www.ap-gfkpoll.com

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