

US House passes bill ending NSA bulk data collection

May 13 2015, by Michael Mathes



Civil liberties activists hold a rally against surveillance of US citizens in Washington on January 17, 2014

The US House of Representatives voted Wednesday to end the NSA's dragnet collection of telephone data from millions of Americans, a controversial program revealed in 2013 by former security contractor Edward Snowden.

The USA Freedom Act is seen as a big win for privacy and civil rights advocates. The White House backs the reforms, saying the bill protects privacy while preserving essential [national security](#) authorities.

The measure now heads for a vote in the Senate, where the clash between reformists and supporters of the [intelligence](#) community, coming within the context of warnings on the increasing digital reach of the Islamic State terror group, transcends party lines.

And far-left liberals and staunch conservatives, often at odds on most major legislation, have united in opposition against domestic spying by the National Security Agency.

The bill, which focuses on people in the United States and not overseas, would amend controversial sections of the USA Patriot Act, which passed in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks and which expire on June 1.

The reforms would explicitly prohibit the mass collection of telephone metadata—phone numbers, time and duration of calls—by the NSA, as well as electronic data such as emails and web addresses.

"Americans' liberty and America's security can co-exist," said House Judiciary Committee chairman Bob Goodlatte, who voted for passage.

"These fundamental concepts are not mutually exclusive."



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The reforms scrap the bulk collection detailed in Section 215 of the Patriot Act, replacing it with a targeted program that allows intelligence agencies to collect data from specific individuals or groups, but only with prior approval of the secret national security FISA court.

The data dragnet was operating in complete secrecy after 2001 and

under the supervision of the FISA court since 2006. It was consistently renewed by the administrations of both George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

Under Section 215, the government stored the acquired data. But the new reforms would compel telecoms and other data companies to keep the information, accessible to intelligence agencies only through court order.

"Today's vote was a major win for surveillance reform and a major rebuke for those who want to reauthorize the Patriot Act without change," said Center for Democracy & Technology president Nuala O'Connor.

Not far enough?

The vote came just a week after a US appeals court ruled that the bulk [data collection](#) goes far beyond what Congress authorized.

Some progressive groups expressed concern that reauthorizing the Patriot Act with specific changes was not enough to prevent abuse.



A protestor wearing a Guy-Fawkes-mask holds a banner with a picture of US President Barack Obama to protest against the NSA internet surveillance programme "PRISM" on June 29, 2013 in Hanover, Germany

"Congress is trying to sell the USA Freedom Act to the American people as reform, but what the bill actually does is extend and expand the government's power to monitor our communications under the Patriot Act," said Tiffiniy Cheng, co-founder of Fight for the Future.

Some critics are seizing on key wording in the reforms that may be broadly interpreted to allow more data dragnets.

Conservative House Republican Justin Amash, an early advocate of Patriot Act reforms, blasted the new bill as "a step in the wrong direction."

He said that while the new law would authorize government to obtain records based on a "specific selection term," that phrase "is defined so broadly under the bill as to have little effect on narrowing the scope of items the government may obtain through a 215 order."

But House Speaker John Boehner hailed the bill for enhancing FISA court transparency while allowing flexibility to pursue terror suspects.

"Terrorists across the of globe are bent on destroying our nation and our way of life, and we must provide our [intelligence community](#) the tools it needs to stop them," Boehner said.

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