

Top telecom regulator faces internal probe: lawmaker

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Federal Communications Commission Chairman Ajit Pai is the object of an internal investigation into his handling of a politically sensitive broadcast merger

The top US telecom regulator is the object of an internal watchdog probe into the handling of rule changes that benefitted a politically

sensitive merger of two major broadcast operators, a lawmaker said Thursday.

A spokesman for Representative Frank Pallone, a Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said the [inspector general's](#) probe is on the actions of Federal Communications Commission chairman Ajit Pai.

Pallone's spokesman confirmed a report in the New York Times, which first reported the FCC inspector general's probe into Pai's actions on rules affecting the proposed deal in which Sinclair Broadcasting, the largest US broadcast television group, is seeking to buy Tribune Media Co.

"For months I have been trying to get to the bottom of the allegations about Chairman Pai's relationship with Sinclair Broadcasting," Pallone said in a statement.

"I am grateful to the FCC's inspector general that he has decided to take up this important investigation."

The probe, which is expected to examine whether Pai and his aides improperly coordinated [rule](#) changes with Sinclair, could create problems for the pending approval of the \$3.9 billion transaction.

An FCC spokesman called the notion of favoritism by Pai "absurd," and noted that the agency had proposed a record fine against Sinclair for violating sponsorship identification rules.

"Chairman Pai has for many years called on the FCC to update its media ownership regulations to match the realities of the modern marketplace," the statement said.

"Considering the strong case for modernizing these rules, it's not surprising that those who disagree with him would prefer to do whatever they can to distract from the merits of the reforms that the FCC has adopted."

Critics of the deal have argued the FCC revised its rules—which prevented a single company from controlling too many broadcast stations and from controlling more than a single broadcaster in the same market—because of Sinclair's friendly treatment of President Donald Trump.

The deal announced last May would give Sinclair some 233 television stations in 108 markets, adding the 42 operated by Tribune Media including large stations in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles.

The consumer group Free Press said that in light of the investigation, Pai should recuse himself from all decisions related to the Sinclair-Tribune deal.

Free Press is among several consumer organizations which have complained that FCC approval would enable Sinclair to air "politically biased programming" to more than 70 percent of the US population.

"The publicly available evidence suggests a pattern of abuse where Sinclair forces its local stations to air pro-Trump messages in exchange for policy favors from the Trump administration and its FCC chairman," said Free Press senior counsel Jessica Gonzalez.

"If the deal is allowed to proceed, it would expand the company's longstanding pattern of evading public-interest obligations and abusing its market power to score political points, spread propaganda and serve a right-wing political agenda."

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