



Political Pressure on Platforms Undermines Free Speech

By [Ash Johnson](#)

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Online free speech is facing significant threats around the world, and those threats have now spread from authoritarian countries to democratic ones, including in the [UK](#) and the [EU](#). It is also facing threats in the United States from both political parties. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Meta, testified in August 2024 before the House Judiciary Committee that Facebook [censored some content](#) related to the COVID-19 pandemic, including humor and satire, due to pressure the company received from the Biden administration. Likewise, Google revealed to the same committee in September 2025 that the Biden administration [pressured the company](#) to remove or censor content related to COVID-19 and elections that did not violate YouTube's policies.

The Trump Administration followed a similar playbook when, in October 2025, it [pressured Apple to remove](#) the ICEBlock app from its App Store. Now, the app's developer is [suing the administration](#) for violating the First Amendment. ICEBlock is an app that allows users to anonymously report sightings of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents within a 5-mile radius, comparable to map apps that allow users to report police sightings, warning drivers of speed traps. These sightings do not include photographs or videos of the agents. Trump officials argue that the app encourages violence against ICE agents, a claim the app's developer denies.

App stores and other online services, as private entities, have [the right to remove](#) third-party, legal content they find objectionable. An online platform removing third-party content does not violate the First Amendment, and in fact, private entities have their own First Amendment right to decide what content aligns with their service and remove that



which does not. This right is a key component of the digital economy, giving consumers a choice between different online services with different content moderation practices and encouraging competition and innovation in online services' content moderation practices in order to attract consumers who favor either more free speech or less objectionable content.

However, the government should not step in to influence these decisions or suppress speech, including online content, regardless of which political party holds office, because it forces companies to appease those holding political power rather than designing their platforms to appeal to their customers. While many may not like apps that help people avoid law enforcement action, as long as these apps are not against the law, the government should not be putting its thumb on the scales.

In this specific case, ICEBlock's developer **may not have enough evidence** to prove that government officials threatened Apple to remove the app, rather than requesting or convincing them to do so. This would follow the precedent set by the Supreme Court in June 2024 when it **struck down a lawsuit** against the Biden administration over the pressure it put on social media platforms to censor certain content, since, as Justice Amy Coney Barrett wrote, there was no "proof of an ongoing pressure campaign."

However, the Trump administration's actions still pose a threat to free speech online in the same way that the Biden administration did. Republicans rightly opposed the pressure former President Biden put on social media platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic. And they also criticized Twitter for its decision to block users from linking to an October 2020 *New York Post* article about the contents of a laptop that once belonged to Hunter Biden, son of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden, following pressure from the Biden campaign. Then-CEO of Twitter, Jack Dorsey, **admitted that this decision** was "wrong," and Twitter implemented changes such as labeling potentially misleading tweets instead of removing them.

While the **White House argues** that ICEBlock encourages violence against ICE agents, liberals make the same argument when they claim that some conservative talking points encourage violence against certain communities, including many of **Trump's own statements**. Any ideology, taken to a radical extreme, can lead to violence, but that is not the same as directly inciting violence, nor does it mean that the ideology itself is violent.

No policymaker—neither federal nor state, neither American nor foreign—should be directing online services to remove lawful content they find objectionable. Free speech is not truly free unless it allows speech that is controversial, partisan, or objectionable. In order to uphold free speech as a core tenet of American democracy and allow online platforms the freedom to innovate and evolve to best serve their users, no administration should involve itself in online services' content moderation decisions beyond policing illegal content and activity.



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700 K Street NW, Suite 600
Washington, DC 20001
mail@itif.org | (202) 449-1351

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