

**REMARKS OF FCC CHAIRMAN AJIT PAI
AT THE ROBOCALL SYMPOSIUM OF THE NEW ENGLAND STATES**

ROXBURY, MA

NOVEMBER 21, 2019

Good afternoon! I couldn't be more excited to be here. And, yes, that's partly because I'm totally loaded up on Dunkin'. When in Rome.

Thank you to Governor Baker and everyone in your administration for organizing today's event.

Thank you to the many government officials who have joined us today. We are especially honored to be joined by the attorneys general of both Vermont and New Hampshire—the Subaru and Jeep Cherokee of New England states.

I'm not surprised that we have such a huge turnout today, because pretty much everybody, everywhere is desperate to do something about the scourge of unwanted robocalls. How much do people hate them? I would argue that the robocall is the one of the few things in America more widely despised than the New England Patriots.

Please do me a favor: don't pretend to be offended. I know you take joy in the rest of the country's suffering. Our tears sustain you.

But if you think about it, robocalls and the Patriots have much in common. Nobody can get them to go away. They are always one step ahead of their adversaries, constantly adapting and adjusting to withstand any challenge. Plus, Bill Belichick has the charm and warmth of an automated, pre-recorded message.

One more way robocalls are like the Patriots is that the challenge of taking them down somehow seems to be getting even more formidable. Just two weeks ago, a private company that makes robocall-blocking technology put out some numbers that are truly staggering. In October, there were 5.7 billion robocalls. That translates to 2,115 robocalls every second.

Dig deeper and the story gets even worse. 2.65 billion of these calls—47%—were scams. These scams are as diverse as they are plentiful. We saw more than 100 million unwanted calls in each of the following categories: health-related scams, interest rate scams, student loan scams, Social Security scams, and warranty scams.

Who ever imagined we would long for the days when telemarketing was the most annoying kind of robocall? By the way, 671 million telemarketing robocalls went out last month, so they've hardly gone away.

To make a meaningful dent in the robocall challenge, it's going to take a team effort. We're going to need leadership at all levels of government. We need engagement from consumer groups. And the private sector will need to do its part. From the looks of the coalition in today's event, I think we're up to the challenge.

Let me talk about some of the biggest initiatives we're pushing at the FCC.

Since becoming Chairman, I've said repeatedly that combatting unwanted robocalls is our top consumer protection and enforcement priority. And for good reason. Unwanted calls far and away generate the most consumer complaints to the FCC, with over 200,000 complaints each year. In fact, unwanted calls account for roughly 60% of all the complaints we receive.

So what are we doing about it?

The FCC took a major step this June when we voted to allow phone companies to establish call-blocking services as a default setting for consumers. That is, phone companies can now block robocalls for consumers without consumers having to proactively sign up for it. Companies that do this can use reasonable analytics to determine which calls to block—the same thing that’s done currently by call-blocking apps, and similar to what email providers do when they direct junk messages into consumers’ spam folders. To offer call-blocking by default, carriers simply have to inform consumers and allow those who don’t want these services to opt out. I’m pleased that some carriers have started to implement call blocking by default, and I hope that more will join them soon.

In addition, carriers can now offer consumers the option of using their own contact list as a “white list.” That is, once carriers adopt the technology, consumers can ask their carrier to block all calls that come from people who aren’t on their own phone’s contact list. If a caller wasn’t already on that list, the call would be blocked.

One possible use for this would be in support of elderly relatives, who are too often targets of robocall scams. Imagine being able to set up a list of phone numbers that your grandmother or grandfather would receive calls from. This would allow them to know that the calls they get are coming from people they can trust.

And in 2017, we made clear that carriers could block telephone calls that purport to come from unassigned or invalid phone numbers, such as area codes that don’t exist.

Another key component of the FCC’s strategy has been promoting better caller ID authentication.

Scammers continue to hide behind spoofed numbers to deceive and defraud American consumers out of money and personal information and to avoid law enforcement. They do this using “neighborhood spoofing,” which makes it look like an incoming call is from a local number, or by spoofing the number of a company or government agency that consumers know and trust. Better caller ID authentication not only helps consumers avoid unwanted calls, it also helps with developing effective tools to block spoofed calls.

This past August, the FCC took some important measures to close some gaps in our caller authentication rules. First, because scammers often robocall us from overseas, we extended the reach of our current Truth in Caller ID rules to cover communications originating outside the United States directed at American consumers. This change will allow the FCC to take action against overseas scammers.

We also expanded the scope of communications covered by our Truth in Caller ID rules to include text messaging and alternative voice services like Voice over IP. Malicious text message spoofing has yet to become a major problem on the scale of spoofed calls, but it’s a growing one. We made clear that fraudsters abusing consumers through text messages will also face the music.

The FCC’s biggest effort to encourage better caller ID authentication is our promotion of the so-called SHAKEN/STIR caller ID authentication framework. SHAKEN/STIR involves what’s essentially a digital fingerprint for each phone call. It will allow a phone network receiving a call to verify that it comes from the number it purports to be from *before* it reaches the customer. This framework will be critical in informing consumers whether the Caller ID information they see is real or spoofed. And it can be used to assist with blocking spoofed calls. That’s why we’ve proposed a safe harbor for phone companies that choose to block calls that can’t be authenticated under SHAKEN/STIR.

And when it comes to the implementation of SHAKEN/STIR, I have made clear my expectation that major carriers will get this done by the end of the year. I have long believed that a voluntary, industry-led process is most likely to achieve this goal effectively. But I also believe in Ronald Reagan’s old maxim, “Trust, but verify.” That’s why, this summer, the FCC started a process to enable us to adopt new regulations early next year if the deadline isn’t met.

I've generally been pleased by the progress reports on SHAKEN/STIR implementation. I'm grateful for the efforts carriers have made to date, and I saw that just this morning, T-Mobile, Comcast, and Inteliquent announced the completion of the first end-to-end SHAKEN/STIR call verification. But the reality is we are only seven weeks away from the end-of-the-year deadline, and we are not yet seeing sufficient implementation by all major voice providers. To any carriers out there who might not be treating this deadline with the urgency it deserves, I am putting them on notice now: at my direction, Commission staff is actively working on developing regulations to make this happen. If industry doesn't get the job done on time, I will not hesitate to call an FCC vote on these new rules.

I would note that we're not alone in pushing industry to do the right thing with SHAKEN/STIR. I was encouraged this August when all 50 state attorneys general and a dozen leading telecom companies signed a joint pact laying out principles for combatting robocalls. Timely implementation of SHAKEN/STIR was at the heart of this document. So I can safely say that I'm not the only person watching with great interest as we approach this deadline.

Another component of the FCC's robocall strategy has been stepping up enforcement against bad actors. Under my leadership, the agency has taken aggressive enforcement actions against robocallers. In fact, the largest fines in the FCC's history have been imposed over the last two years against robocallers, and they've totaled over \$200 million. Our Enforcement Bureau is also working with an industry group that shares information among carriers and providers to help "traceback" the traffic of illegal calls to the originating provider.

Despite all these efforts, the FCC could use some more tools in the toolbox to go after malicious robocallers. That brings me to the last thing I wanted to highlight.

Over the past several months, the FCC has been working with Congress on much-needed bipartisan, anti-robocall legislation, like the TRACED Act and the STOP Robocalls Act. I'm pleased to report that we've had a significant breakthrough on this front. Just last week, the sponsors of competing bills reached an agreement in principle that would give the FCC and law enforcement greater authority to go after scammers. They are in the process of drafting the new legislation, and a bill could be introduced at any time. I know what many of you are probably thinking: what are the chances of passing meaningful legislation as we move into an election year? In this case, I would say better than you think. That's because the lead sponsors of this new bill are Senators John Thune and the Bay State's own Ed Markey, and Representatives Frank Pallone and Greg Walden in the House. With a bipartisan, bicameral coalition like this, I believe that a law can and will be passed and signed by the President—even in this challenging political environment. We just need people to put aside differences and rally together around a common cause.

And that brings me to my closing point. Nobody can solve this problem alone. And that's why—and I can't believe this Chiefs fan is saying this—we need to adopt the Patriot Way. The defining characteristic of the Patriots is that they have the most selfless players in the league—men who sacrifice their personal stats to fit into the team system. Even their one superstar has always taken less money so the team could sign other players. To make a meaningful difference against robocalls, everybody needs to do his or her part. We need to work as one team. Let's get to work, let's do our job, and let's give the American people the peace of mind they deserve.