

Congress Tries to Sneak Through Dangerous Spying Bill Under the Cover of the Coronavirus Crisis

By [Free Press](#)

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Leading members of the House of Representatives are rushing a vote on Wednesday to extend abusive government surveillance powers before they're set to expire on March 15.

If approved, the USA Freedom Reauthorization Act of 2020 would reauthorize Section 215 powers Congress established under the USA Patriot Act in 2001. Section 215 is the provision national-security agencies have cited to support their unwarranted collection of phone records of hundreds of millions of people in the United States.

The new legislation, unveiled by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, is sponsored by Reps. Jerrold Nadler of New York and Adam Schiff of California, chairmen of the House Judiciary and Intelligence Committees respectively. This bill makes some minor reforms, including adding a public advocate to some additional secretive FISA court deliberations. But it fails to put in place limits favored by privacy, racial-justice and civil-liberty advocates, most of whom support an alternative bill, the Safeguarding Americans' Private Records Act, introduced earlier this year with bipartisan support.

Free Press Action Government Relations Director Sandra Fulton made the following statement:

"In the last few weeks, progressive lawmakers have demanded legislation to protect their constituents and avoid a rubber-stamp renewal of the Patriot Act's most dangerous provisions. But now leading Democrats are bypassing regular order, rushing the renewal process, and quietly cutting a deal with pro-surveillance Republicans to allow the NSA and other intelligence agencies to continue spying on innocent people across the United States. These lawmakers are attempting to sneak this bad bill through despite strong bipartisan opposition from the public. And they're doing this without a proper debate, or any chance for amendments from members who want to protect our civil liberties, while the country is focused on the spread of COVID-19.

"The supporters of this harmful legislation are touting it as a strong reform measure, but that couldn't be farther from the truth. It would renew invasive spying powers that endanger vulnerable communities — like people of color, trans folks, activists and journalists — for a president who acts in open and cruel defiance of constitutional limits to his power.

"This makes no sense. The same House leaders who voted to impeach the president for abuse of power are now handing him massive and destructive spying powers in the middle of a public-health crisis. Congress has until March 15 to pass a bill or the sunset provisions of the Patriot Act will kick in and the

law won't be renewed. There are very good reform bills on the table that would renew some of these Patriot Act powers while curbing the worst abuses. But the USA Freedom Reauthorization Act isn't one of those good options.

"The Patriot Act passed in the immediate aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks and created a massive and deeply problematic surveillance infrastructure that national-security forces have repeatedly abused. That's why Congress put in place sunset provisions: so it could reexamine the potential for government misuse of these spying powers and allow for reforms. We need Congress to debate whether the government should maintain such broad and invasive powers. Congress has had almost five years to prepare for this debate, but here lawmakers are sneaking through a renewal of these laws just days before they expire and in the midst of a national health emergency.

"It's unthinkable that any member of Congress would now seek to grant an extension of these powers to the same agencies that have so often sidestepped safeguards and ignored the spirit and the letter of previous similarly milquetoast reforms. Every member of Congress must vote against the USA Freedom Reauthorization Act and demand more reforms and restrictions to runaway government surveillance.

"While we've fought these dangerous spying powers since they were enacted, the Trump administration poses a unique threat to the most vulnerable communities in this country. House Democratic leaders who have opposed Trump's abuse of power in other circumstances shouldn't enable his ability to violate our fundamental privacy rights."

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