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How conservatives learned to love ‘coding for hippies’

By MOHAR CHATTERJEE | 09/03/2025 04:23 PM EDT

With help from John Hendel

When Donald Trump unveiled his White House AI action plan this summer, tech insiders all came away with a striking takeaway: This administration *really* likes open-source AI.

Trump’s plan dove right into wonky details, describing public access to model weights and training data as a “national asset” with commercial upside and geostrategic value. Vice President J.D. Vance framed open-source AI as a way to resist the “left-wing bias” he said was baked into Silicon Valley’s dominant AI platforms. Federal agencies have since been urged to encourage small and midsize businesses to adopt open-source AI systems.

What does this all even mean? “Open-source” refers to AI platforms whose backend code is publicly available rather than locked behind proprietary walls.

It's a practice that splits the tech world. Until recently, companies like OpenAI and Google kept their most advanced models closed — meaning the companies strictly controlled who could see how the software worked, and who could use the code. Anthropic, which presents itself as a publicly-minded AI company, doesn't offer an open-source version of its models either.

Meta took a different approach, making some of its code openly available.

The idea of open-source itself is older than AI. In the 1980s and 1990s, programmers developed open-source software such as Unix and Linux to provide alternatives to the dominance of firms like Microsoft and Apple, whose systems were both dominant and proprietary.

The open-source movement was driven by an anti-corporate spirit, rooted in collaboration and rejection of gatekeepers. In Washington, conservatives of that era saw it as “coding for hippies,” as libertarian tech thinker Adam Thierer puts it.

Back then, Thierer recalls, he was starting the Heritage Foundation's digital technology program and found the general GOP stance towards open-source was deeply skeptical — since open-source was at odds with traditional conservative commitments to property rights.

Supporters of the idea were found mostly in academic and activist circles — and there they remained through the Biden years, as White House officials weighed the national security risks of making advanced AI systems widely available. But along the way, some figures on the populist right began warming to the concept as part of a broader turn against Big Tech.

Vance, for one, cast open-source AI — even when he was a senator — as a way to reduce the dominance of entrenched tech platforms.

The release of China's DeepSeek AI early this year changed the equation in Washington altogether. Smaller than most leading American AI models and just as powerful, DeepSeek was built as an open-source offering, primed for global adoption. Trump called it a “wake-up call” about the U.S.'s standing in the global AI race. The fear that Chinese AI systems might become the global standard strengthened the case for U.S. companies to release their own frontier models in open form.

Since then, different strands of the conservative movement have found reasons to embrace open-source AI. Populists see a tool to weaken the market power of Silicon Valley giants. Venture capitalists argue it helps startups compete. “For today’s conservatives, open-source has become a way to stick it to big tech and inject more competition into the marketplace,” said Thierer.

The coalition in support of open-source surfaced most recently in opposition to California’s SB 1047, a bill to regulate powerful AI systems. “People across the board came out and said, actually, open-source is really important to us. We believe in open-source, as a society and an industry, not just because of dollars and cents,” said Lauren Wagner, a tech investor and policy advisor with the nonprofit Abundance Institute. “It almost took on an ideological flavor.”

Open-source AI remains a niche issue, but one with growing political salience. As Wagner put it, the support base is broad enough that now attempts to restrict it could quickly become a flashpoint — in both parties.

LET MY DATA FLOW

Wednesday marked a big win for global tech cooperation after a European court upheld a transatlantic data sharing agreement between the U.S. and the European Union.

This pact, struck in 2023, is meant to ensure companies can transfer data belonging to European residents between the two continents while ensuring privacy protections afforded to Europeans under the bloc’s General Data Protection Regulation.

One longstanding tripping point under GDPR, which felled a previous framework in 2020, has been ensuring Europeans can object to their personal data being collected for government surveillance. Wednesday’s decision, however, said the U.S. has “ensured an adequate level of protection for personal data transferred from the European Union to organisations in that country.”

Tech industry reps immediately cheered the ruling.

“Thanks to this ruling, data transfers between the US and EU can continue, which will ensure the continued delivery of digital services benefiting European consumers and businesses,” Chamber of Progress Senior Director for Europe Kay Jebelli said in a statement. “Hopefully this puts an end to the attacks of privacy

campaigners who would otherwise see Europeans lose access to many of the digital services that they enjoy.”

CONTENT WARS, TRANSATLANTIC EDITION

A House hearing on Wednesday turned into a spectacle around overseas online content rules featuring Nigel Farage, the leader of the U.K.’s right-wing Reform Party, POLITICO’s Anthony Andragna and Gabby Miller report.

Farage’s target: The online safety rules in his own backyard.

During a session convened by House Judiciary Committee Chair Jim Jordan (R-Ohio), Farage attacked the online safety rules in the U.K. and European Union for creating an “awful, authoritarian situation” at odds with Western values. The hearing showcased an emerging ideological convergence in which Jordan and the populist Farage are increasingly skeptical of these overseas rules — an issue increasingly drawing in President Donald Trump amid his global trade negotiations.

Jordan and other members of the committee visited the U.K. and Brussels over the summer in a congressional delegation, which featured some friction between Farage and House Judiciary ranking member Jamie Raskin (D-Md.) over free speech issues.

Raskin, for his part, downplayed the merits of Wednesday’s gathering. “This hearing is just a drive-by hit against a strong democratic ally to benefit a Donald Trump sycophant and wannabe,” he said.

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