



[Home & Garden](#)   [Health & Leisure](#)   [Tech](#)   [Baby & Kid](#)   [Style](#)   [Gifts](#)   [Deals](#)

We independently review everything we recommend. When you buy through our links, we may earn a commission. [Learn more >](#)

---

## Real Talk

Advice, staff picks, mythbusting, and more. Let us help you.



Photo: Serhii Sobolevskyi/iStock

## What You Should Know About Right to Repair

PUBLISHED JULY 15, 2021

Thorin Klosowski



 Save

Imagine that you spent over a thousand dollars on your laptop just a few years ago, but now it barely holds a charge. Without a new battery, you're tethered to an outlet, which is both wildly inconvenient and not the point of a laptop. But it turns out that a new battery is impossible to install anyway, so you feel forced to drop another grand on a new laptop, even though your old one works perfectly fine otherwise. This is actually a near-universal experience, whether it involves a laptop, a phone, or a car.

As products get more difficult to repair, a growing right-to-repair movement has been pushing for legislation that requires access to repair tools. Last week, President Joe Biden signed an executive order that pushes the Federal Trade Commission to make third-party product repair easier, but that's just part of the larger issue. Let's take a look at how and why any of this matters.

### What is "right to repair"?

choice. People are pretty used to this concept when it comes to older cars and appliances, but right-to-repair advocates argue that modern tech, especially anything with a computer chip inside, is rarely repairable.

Legally, American shoppers are mostly already allowed to repair whatever they buy (those warranty-voiding stickers you've probably seen on gadgets are usually bogus under the Magnuson Moss Warranty Act), but practically speaking, people are often denied the information or the parts to do so. This is where the right-to-repair movement comes in. The Repair Association, a right-to-repair advocacy group, has several policy objectives, including some that can be corrected with laws and others that require a shift in buyer expectations. Those objectives are:

- **Make information available:** Everyone should have reasonable access to manuals, schematics, and software updates. Software licenses shouldn't limit support options and should make clear what's included in a sale.
- **Make parts and tools available:** The parts and tools to service devices, including diagnostic tools, should be made available to third parties, including individuals.
- **Allow unlocking:** The government should legalize unlocking, adapting, or modifying a device, so an owner can install custom software.
- **Accommodate repair in the design:** Devices should be designed in a way as to make repair possible.

The first two bullet points are included in most right-to-repair legislative proposals. Software licensing is where the laws get strange, but for now, there's an exemption in the Digital Millennium Copyright Act that makes it legal to "jailbreak" devices such as phones, speakers, appliances, and nearly anything else. This exemption theoretically allows a device to run custom software, which can extend its life or functionality if the manufacturer abandons that device. However, just because such modifications are legal doesn't mean they're possible, and manufacturers routinely push out updates to block jailbreaking.

The last core idea, designing with repairability in mind, is less about enacting laws and more about shifting expectations. Gay Gordon-Byrne,

executive director of the [The Repair Association](#), notes that although currently proposed right-to-repair laws focus on the first two objectives, “There’s obviously a lot of other work that needs to be done to make sure that we stop making things that can’t be fixed.”

One potential way to tackle the design problem comes from [France’s repairability index](#), which assigns repairability scores in hopes of shifting buyer behavior. In this global economy, any company that wants to sell its products in France needs to submit its products’ scores on that index. The closest equivalent in the US is the [EPEAT Registry](#), which doesn’t put as robust of a focus on repairability in its sustainability scores.

Repair advocates focus on more than just consumer technology, too, as they have also highlighted the need to [repair John Deere tractors](#), [medical equipment](#), and more.

## **Do people even need the right to repair?**

More and more products aren’t easily repairable. A product may be impossible to open up without destroying it ([wireless earbuds are notorious](#) for this, though [novel solutions](#) sometimes come up), may have no third-party options for parts (Nintendo was [recently sued](#) over “Joy-Con drift,” a problem that requires Switch owners to send in their controllers to Nintendo for a fix), or may deny owners the ability to install custom software to extend its life after the company ends support (smart-home devices struggle with this, such as when Sonos tried to [sunset support for older devices](#), or when [Nest disabled the Revolv Hub](#)). Even appliances, long a bastion of repairability, are increasingly utilizing computer chips, becoming potentially more difficult to fix down the road.

Intentionally or not, manufacturers employ all sorts of tricks that make repair difficult, such as using proprietary screws, declining to publish repair documentation, or gluing parts together. Sites like [iFixit](#) (which also [sells some of our favorite repair tools](#)) have sprung up over the years to offer product “teardowns” and documentation for user repair. But a single company or a handful of dedicated [YouTube tutorial creators](#) can make only so much documentation to cover the sea of products that exist today.

There is the hope that with increased repairability, the world will see less e-waste. “You can’t make them last if you can’t make them work,” said Gordon-Byrne. “Any time a manufacturer says that they are being good to the environment, and then they refuse to let you fix your stuff, I just cry

foul.” Nathan Proctor, senior right to repair campaign director at [U.S. Public Interest Research Group](#), a consumer-advocacy group, agrees: “We shouldn’t be recycling usable technology, we should be reusing it. That’s far better for the environment.” An easy layup in this department for most companies would be offering some way to replace the battery, as Kyle Wiens, CEO of iFixit, says: “There’s lots of things we would like, but that’s the one that limits life spans the most and I think harms consumers the most.”

Take Apple as an example of how this kind of thing tends to play out. Sure, Apple has the Genius Bar for repairs. But not every city in the country has an Apple Store, and in rural areas driving to one might take hours. After years of pushback, in 2019 [Apple finally](#) opened its iPhone parts and tools to third-party repair shops (and in 2020 it [expanded that to Macs](#)), but Apple continues to [make computers](#) that aren’t easily upgradable or repairable by buyers after purchase. Right-to-repair legislation would ensure that at the very least, Apple would be required to make those repair parts and tools, alongside basic documentation, available to everyone.

Apple isn’t the only offender here. Wiens points to Samsung as another culprit: “If you go to a local repair shop with a cracked S11 and say, ‘Will you fix it?’ they’ll say, ‘Well, we could, but it’s so expensive you don’t want to bother.’” Wiens adds that Samsung also has diagnostic tools that independent repair shops don’t have access to, which gives official repair shops a competitive advantage.

There’s also evidence that when companies want to make something repairable, they can. Wiens points to the Surface Laptop 3, which Microsoft [improved in terms of repairability](#) between versions without changing the core design. “They rearranged things inside the product, and they found their way to making a serviceable product.”

Buyers have taken for granted that what they buy can be repaired, but that’s increasingly not the case. Right-to-repair legislation would establish rules that promote repairability practices throughout industries, including consumer technology, agriculture equipment, and medical equipment. By requiring manufacturers to sell replacement parts and make documentation available, such laws would make it easier for people to extend the life of the products they buy.

## What's the case against the right to repair?

Facebook, Toyota, Verizon, and other companies lobbied against a right-to-repair law in New York state in 2018, according to The Markup. In 2017, an Apple lobbyist warned one Nebraska senator that the state would suddenly become a hotspot for bad actors if it passed right-to-repair legislation.

One letter (PDF) signed by many industry lobbyists opposing Hawaii's SB425, including industry groups such as the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers and the Consumer Technology Association, outlines the main points in opposition to right-to-repair legislation: security risks from giving criminals access to technical information, safety risks from unauthorized repair, and risks to intellectual property.

The industry trade group TechNet issued a statement in response to Biden's executive order, stating, "Allowing unvetted third parties with access to sensitive diagnostic information, software, tools, and parts would jeopardize the safety of consumers' computers, tablets, and devices and put them at risk for fraud and data theft."

We haven't seen examples of security risks in practice, and some cybersecurity experts disagree with the claims manufacturers are making. Paul F. Roberts, founder of SecuRepairs.org, an organization of information security professionals who support the right to repair, says, "I think there are real issues with connected device security, but the right to repair is not really a part of that conversation." Roberts continues, "There's a lot to be done to make connected device ecosystems more secure, but the price of having connected devices can't be a monopoly on aftermarket service parts and repair."

In a May 2021 report (PDF), the Federal Trade Commission looked at many of the examples against the right to repair and found that most manufacturers' reasoning, including statements about security and safety, was flawed: "Based on a review of comments submitted and materials presented during the Workshop, there is scant evidence to support manufacturers' justifications for repair restrictions." The FTC does leave room for some of the copyright implications, though: "Commissioner Wilson and Commissioner Phillips note that the report excludes from the scope of its coverage an analysis of manufacturers' intellectual property rights, which may provide legitimate justification for some repair restrictions."

## What will Biden's executive order do?

The [executive order](#) covers all sorts of consumer protections related to airlines and broadband but focuses on only one part of the right-to-repair objective: independent and DIY repairs. A [fact sheet](#) accompanying the order says it “[e]ncourages the FTC to limit powerful equipment manufacturers from restricting people’s ability to use independent repair shops or do DIY repairs—such as when tractor companies block farmers from repairing their own tractors.” How the FTC interprets this direction is yet to be seen, but on July 21 the [FTC will vote](#) on whether to issue a new policy statement, which, if approved, will offer a better idea of the scale of the commission’s rules.

Wiens points to the [eyeglass rule](#) as a potential way to understand how the FTC might approach the right to repair: “The eyeglass rule says, if you go to the optometrists, they have to give you your prescription. When you walk out the door, they can’t force you to buy glasses. You can imagine they [FTC] could easily say, ‘Hey, if you’re going to make special software available to your manufacturer repair shops, you should make those available to consumers.’”

Proctor still sees the executive order as a win: “To me the most important part is this is an official endorsement of the right to repair as a federal policy priority for the president.” It also signals the potential for a multi-agency approach, which can help coordinate the handling of various issues in a way that still protects competition, security, and safety.

## What's the point of legislation if there's an executive order?

The executive order only directs the FTC to make rules, and that’s unlikely to address everything right-to-repair advocates would like to see. “They may or may not address all the points that we think are important,” Gordon-Byrne says. “So, we’re going to proceed as though state legislation is still going to be preferred.”

Right-to-repair legislation is making its way through [at least 25 states](#), and [one national bill has been filed in Congress](#). Everyone we spoke to agreed that state and federal laws are still needed even with the executive order.

To understand how new rules and laws could affect the products you buy in the future, consider similar laws specific to the automotive industry. In 2012, Massachusetts passed the [Motor Vehicle Owners Right to Repair Act](#), which forced carmakers to allow independent mechanics to access the diagnostic tools in cars (the law has since been amended to cover wireless diagnostic data, too, though carmakers [are fighting that](#)). Essentially, if your check engine light comes on, the law makes it possible to take the vehicle to just about any mechanic to figure out why. After the bill passed in Massachusetts, carmakers agreed to use the state's rules [as a national standard](#). It's possible that some right-to-repair laws will follow a similar path: If one state passes a right-to-repair law, companies may find it easier to consider that the national standard instead of trying to comply with the law in just one state.

Even then, Proctor says, there's still more to do: "I don't plan to take my foot off the gas in any way. We'll continue to push forward to get us to the point where people can have what they need to fix their stuff."

---

## Mentioned above

These are the best precision screwdrivers for most people. Here's what we recommend.

**The Best Precision Screwdriver** →

---

## Further reading

**The Framework Laptop Could Revolutionize**



**repairability. we hope it does.**

**How to Recycle Your Used Electronics**

**Essential Tools for Basic Home Repair**

**Hand Tools Everyone Should Own**

Wirecutter is the product recommendation service from The New York Times. Our journalists combine independent research with (occasionally) over-the-top testing so you can make quick and confident buying decisions. Whether it's finding great products or discovering helpful advice, we'll help you get it right (the first time).



About Wirecutter

Our team

Staff demographics

Jobs at Wirecutter

Contact us

How to pitch

Deals

Lists

Blog

Newsletters

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Cookie Policy](#) | [Partnerships & Advertising](#) | [Licensing & Reprints](#) | [RSS](#)

© 2023 Wirecutter, Inc., A New York Times Company