

Google's top Washington lobbyist to 'step down'

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Former Republican Rep. Susan Molinari is stepping down as the head of Google's Washington office at the end of the year, the company said today, a change in policy leadership that comes at one of the most politically fraught times in the company's history.



Google and other tech giants face a wave of criticism in Washington over their handling of foreign election meddling, political speech and data privacy. They're also still reeling from Congress, in a landmark first, chipping away this year at their broad immunity from being held liable for user-posted content.

Google in particular has also been snarled in controversy involving work for the Defense Department. The company said earlier this year it would let a contract to provide artificial intelligence technology to the Pentagon expire in 2019 after employees raised concerns about their work being used by the military. Critics pounced on the company's decision as unpatriotic.

Google has sought to defray Washington scrutiny in part by spending big on influence efforts, and Molinari's ultimate replacement will inherit a large and growing lobbying portfolio. Google spent more than \$18 million on federal lobbying last year, disclosure records show, ranking it among the biggest spenders of any corporation.

In June, Google hired Karan Bhatia, a former George W. Bush administration official and policy chief at GE, to head its global policy team from Washington. He will oversee Molinari's replacement.

Molinari will stay at the company as a senior adviser to "build relationships externally" with members of Congress, political parties and state representatives. In a statement, Molinari cited family changes in the last year as her reason for leaving the position after nearly seven years.

"I was looking for the right time to step back and step away and now that we have a global policy leader, I am comfortable in making the transition," she said.

Kent Walker, whom Google promoted in July to senior vice president of global affairs, praised Molinari in a statement as a "passionate leader" who has "brought extraordinary experience and political judgement to her work."

But Google's relationship with Washington has become increasingly strained in the last years of Molinari's tenure.

Google, Facebook and Twitter have been summoned to Capitol Hill on multiple occasions to answer

questions about foreign governments, particularly Russia, manipulating their social media platforms to influence the 2016 president election. Google refused to send its CEO to a September hearing despite requests from Senate Intelligence Committee leaders, drawing the ire of lawmakers who opted to sit an empty chair at the witness table rather than hear from a more junior executive.

The company has also found itself in Republicans' cross-hairs over accusations that its liberal-leaning workforce suppresses conservative viewpoints in its search results. President Donald Trump tweeted in August that Google's news search was "RIGGED, for me & others, so that almost all stories & news is BAD" because it served up news outlets like CNN in its top results.

"Google & others are suppressing voices of Conservatives and hiding information and news that is good. They are controlling what we can & cannot see. This is a very serious situation-will be addressed!" Trump continued.

Those flames were fanned when an internal recording was leaked in September that showed a company meeting in which visibly upset executives comforted concerned staff following Trump's election victory.

Hostile rhetoric hasn't been Google's only headache. The company staunchly opposed legislation that makes internet companies more liable for knowingly facilitating sex trafficking on their platforms because it carved an exception out of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. That statute has for more than two decades shielded Google and others from legal accountability for things their users post, keeping them from being hit with costly, possibly fatal civil or criminal penalties and thereby helping them become the juggernauts they are today. The bill amending Section 230 become law earlier this year.

And the company will also soon face a battle over consumer privacy regulation. Lawmakers of both parties have pledged comprehensive privacy legislation in the next Congress. Google has signaled an openness to federal rules, but it's likely to clash with consumer groups and certain lawmakers over what those rules should include and what responsibility companies must shoulder.

What's more, Google's antitrust woes in Europe could make their way stateside. The DOJ and FTC have indicated that the tech industry may need more scrutiny due to its market power, a shift in tone that has put Google, Amazon, Facebook and other massive tech companies on alert.

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