

Google's Quiet Pushback Against California Privacy Bill Surfaces Amid Rising Legal Pressure

September 13, 2025 - In early 2025, Google initiated a subtle but coordinated campaign to block a proposed California law AB 566 that would require web browsers to allow users to automatically signal their preference that websites not share their personal information with third parties. The campaign, largely conducted out of public view, included sending emails to small business owners across the country, suggesting that the bill would damage their ability to use online advertising tools.

The abnormal part of Google's strategy was its silence in official channels: the company did not publicly oppose the bill, nor did it formally voice its concerns in the legislative record. Even the bill's author, Assemblymember Josh Lowenthal, said he only learned of Google's outreach when a reporter asked. The measure still passed the legislature, though it was amended to delay implementation until 2027 and to include liability protections for browser makers like Google.

This behind-the-scenes effort comes as Google is confronting a more visible legal reckoning in the U.S. and Europe. In the U.S. Department of Justice case decided in August 2024, a federal judge found that Google maintained an illegal monopoly in search, largely through exclusive contracts with device makers, browsers, and wireless carriers. As part of remedies issued in September 2025, Google has been barred from entering into new exclusive distribution deals for its search engine, Chrome browser, and other core services. The court also ordered Google to share certain search index data with rivals.

Across the Atlantic, the European Commission has fined Google €2.95 billion (roughly US\$3.45 billion) for anticompetitive practices in its advertising technology business. Regulators concluded that Google unfairly favored its own ad exchange tool over competing ad-tech providers, harming publishers, advertisers, and rival suppliers in the ad chain.

Seen in light of these rulings, Google's stealth campaign in California appears particularly bold. While many lobbyists and large corporations take public stances or enter the legislative record when contesting laws, Google seems to have chosen a different path: mobilize small business owners through targeted communications, but avoid formal public association with opposition until laws are passed or nearly passed. It raises questions about transparency: when major tech firms influence policy by recruiting others to speak for them, the public (and even legislators) may be less aware of who is steering policy and why.

The timing also shows the stakes for Google. The U.S. antitrust decision undermined some of its most foundational business arrangements—exclusive search default status on phones and browsers, for example—and requires data sharing with rivals. The EU's fine adds pressure (financial and reputational) and signals regulators' growing intolerance of self-preferencing and opaque practices in ad tech. And yet, Google's tactics in California suggest a belief that influence can still be wielded far from the spotlight.

While the strategies used by Google are not unique to tech or even new in lobbying practice, the contrast between its legal defeats and its quieter political maneuvers feels sharp: losing in court on monopoly and anti-competitive grounds, while pushing back behind closed doors on consumer-privacy legislation that "if fully enforced" could curtail aspects of its advertising-data model. For Californians, and for the public more broadly, these episodes illustrate how policy, privacy, and power intersect—often outside the rooms where people expect to see them.

by Jim Malmberg

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