

WASHINGTON | CORE

REVOLUTIONIZING TECH REPAIR

The Right to Repair Movement Gains Momentum

In a world where technology is constantly evolving and planned obsolescence has taken a toll on consumers, the right to repair movement has been greatly increasing its presence in the world of manufacturing. Washington CORE sat down late last year with Ms. Gay Gordon-Byrne, the Executive Director of The Repair Association, to delve into the heart of this important movement. As we move through the complex landscape of right to repair, we'll explore its current efforts, its goals and challenges, and the global resonance of a cause that could change the way we interact with our technology and machinery.



Since its establishment in July 2013, the Repair Association has battled for the right to repair, on both national and state fronts. Its mission is clear: to advocate for policies, regulations, statutes, and standards that support repair-friendly practices at all levels of government. The Repair Association also confronts corporations that seek to restrict access to repair tools and manuals, and manufacturers who seem to design products to be deliberately hard to repair. The Repair Association works with international advocates, aiming to build a global consensus supporting the right to repair.¹



As Executive Director of the Repair Association, Ms. Gordon-Byrne works directly with legislators to promote the interests of the repair community. Under Ms. Gordon-Byrne's leadership, the Repair Association effectively operates as a trade association, representing over 3 million repair and reuse professionals across the United States. These professionals have expertise in repairing and refurbishing everything from smart phones to servers to tractors. Through their collective efforts, millions of products have remained in use and not delegated to landfills, a net positive for the U.S. economy. In addition to advocating for a competitive repair market, the Repair Association seeks to enhance product quality and longevity on a broader scale.

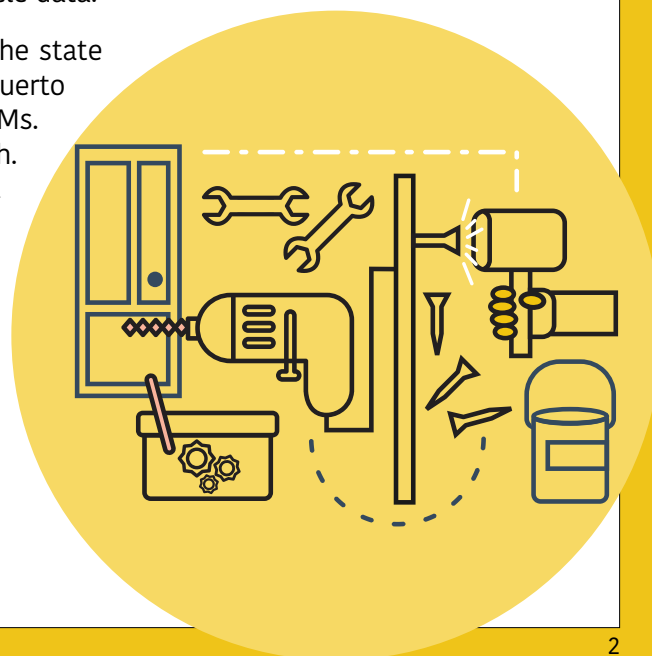
Repairing a Broken System: The Current Landscape

The right to repair movement is about much more than just fixing gadgets. It is a battle against a system that often leaves consumers powerless. At its core, the right to repair movement is a broad effort to secure repair options and prevent repair limitations. The push for right to repair legislation has three main goals: preserving the right to open products, increasing the availability of parts and tools, and keeping independent repair shops in business.

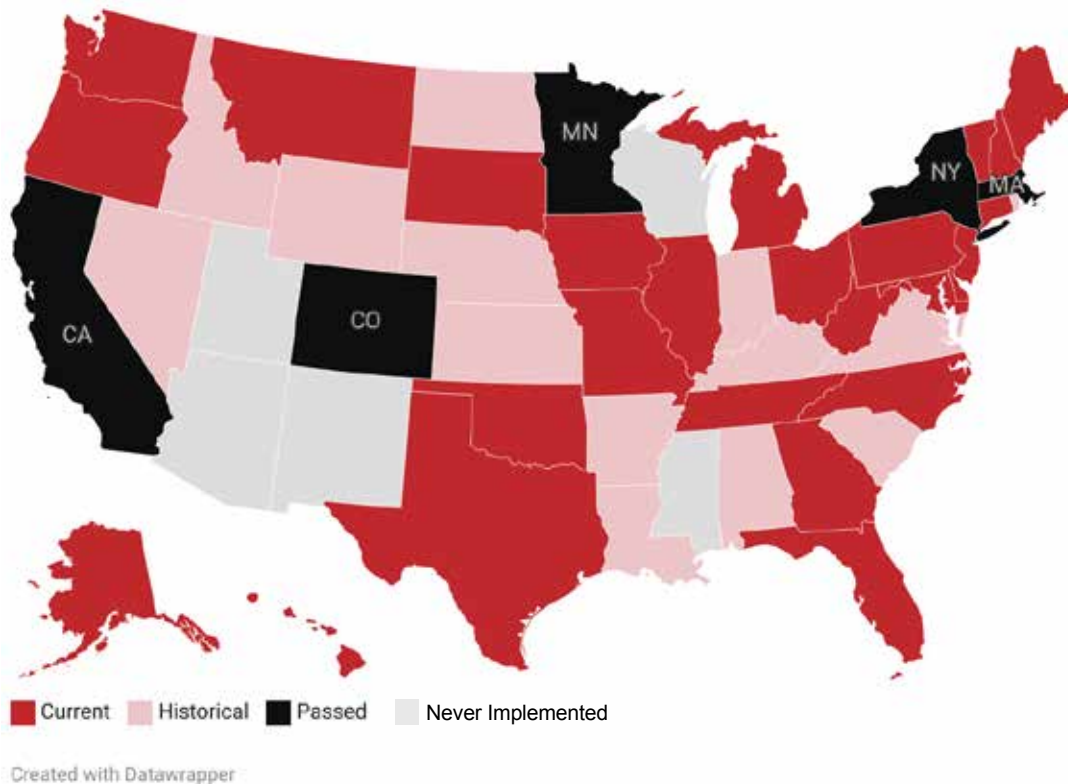
While the public often associates this movement with consumer electronics, it encompasses a wide variety of industries, including agricultural equipment, home appliances, medical devices, motor vehicles, and information technology.

According to Ms. Gordon-Byrne, the movement employs a two-pronged approach, addressing both federal and state fronts. The Biden Administration's Executive Order of July 2021, titled "Promoting Competition in the American Economy,"² marked a significant advance for the movement by making self-repairs or third-party repairs more accessible. Additionally, a bill introduced to the House in February 2023, titled the "Right to Equitable and Professional Auto Industry Repair (REPAIR) Act," aims to ensure that mechanics and repair shops, not just car dealerships, have access to essential vehicle data.²

Despite these advances on the federal level, the impact at the state level has been much more significant, with 45 U.S. states and Puerto Rico introducing various right to repair bills. According to Ms. Gordon-Byrne, the interest among state legislators is very high. Colorado, Minnesota, Massachusetts, New York and California have passed some form of right to repair bills in the last three years and this work has set the stage for future legislative success. The map below shows the status of right to repair legislation in the U.S. Black states have successfully passed right to repair legislation. Red states have right to repair legislation that are currently being discussed. Pink states have previously filed legislation in 2023, but are not active in 2024, while gray states have never filed legislation.



Current Status of State Legislation in the U.S.



Source: Repair Association

Sustainability and the Circular Economy

Electronic waste is now the fastest growing waste stream in the world. Americans purchase about 160 million new smartphones each year – using some 23.7 million tons of raw materials annually. Continuing to extract, produce and consume electronics at this rate is not sustainable.³

By empowering consumers to extend the lifespan of their devices, the movement can mitigate the surge in electronic waste and keep electronics out of landfills. The movement supports key principles of the circular economy—reusing, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products for as long as possible.

Furthermore, the right to repair movement fosters local job creation, as repair businesses gain access to essential parts and tools needed to serve their communities. Currently, the consumer electronics repair industry is fragmented, as technicians have trouble getting access to formal training which hinders their ability to elevate their skills. Moreover, the lack of availability of original parts, essential documentation, and specialized tools creates roadblocks for even the most committed repair professionals. Manufacturers hold the key to bridging this information gap, which enables repair workers to do their job.

Industry Groups Starting to See the Light

Despite the movement's goals, it faces opposition. Lobbyists representing leading manufacturers and industry groups, including the American Equipment Manufacturers and the Associated Equipment Distributors, have voiced concerns. These concerns encompass issues related to security, safety, and intellectual property. Industry groups argue that unrestricted access to repair information might compromise user data and device reliability. They also express concern that right to repair legislation could potentially infringe on intellectual property rights.

However, the landscape is evolving. Manufacturers are increasingly embracing repair-friendly changes as consumer preferences shift towards sustainability. For instance, the Repair Association collaborated with Google to address legislative issues regarding the definition of “a part” and the process of assembling these components. Such collaborations between industry groups and manufacturers have yielded legislation that benefits all stakeholders. Notably, tech giants like Microsoft and Apple, who were previously staunch opponents of right to repair legislation, have begun providing access to repair information and parts for their devices.

Additionally, major original equipment manufacturer of agricultural equipment, including John Deere, have signed memoranda of understandings with farming industry groups, such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, ensuring farmers’ and ranchers’ have the right to repair their own farm equipment, without a need to resort to legislative mandates.

Global Ripples: International Efforts

The right to repair movement is not confined to U.S. but is also a global movement with international resonance. In particular, the European Union has taken strides to champion the right to repair. Some European countries, like France, have introduced repairability indexes that provide consumers with information about how easily a product can be repaired. This transparency empowers consumers to make more informed choices and puts pressure on manufacturers to improve repairability.

Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Canada, and India are all also working to redefine the relationship between consumers and technology. These nations are actively adopting design mandates, mandating that products are manufactured with repairability in mind from the outset. The countries that are working to implement right to repair legislation can be seen in the map below.

This international movement extends its significance beyond environmental concerns, as it can play a role in addressing socioeconomic disparities. The inability to afford new products places consumers at a disadvantage, underscoring the vital importance of the right to repair and maintain their existing possessions. In this context, the right to repair is a potent tool for fostering equity and sustainability across borders.

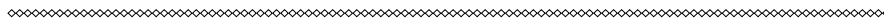
International Right to Repair Advocacy Network



Source: Repair Association

Conclusion: The Right to Repair Movement's Bright Horizon

As our discussion with Ms. Gay Gordon-Byrne concluded, one thing became clear—the right to repair movement is no fleeting trend but instead is long term endeavor. Increasing the ability to carry out technological repairs could transform the technology landscape, fostering a more sustainable, equitable, and empowered future. While the path forward remains challenging, with federal efforts being particularly difficult and manufacturing lobbyists exerting significant influence at the state and local levels, the movement's momentum is unmistakable. From smartphones to tractors, the electronics and machinery we depend on may be poised for a longer life.



Biography of Gay Gordon-Byrne



Gay Gordon-Byrne is the Executive Director of the Digital Right to Repair Coalition, a trade association for the independent repair industry which she helped found in July of 2013. Her early work as a systems engineer and later as management of sales and service personnel in the software industry was the perfect background for buying, selling, and leasing of mainframe data center equipment until her retirement in 2006. Launching her own business in 2006, she developed a database of computer hardware failure rates using repair records from independent repair providers, which were struggling with manufacturer-created repair monopolies. As a volunteer — she took the helm of the International Customer Competitiveness Council of the Service Industry Association, which ultimately was spun off as an advocacy organization to fight for the right to repair everything, even things which included a digital electronic component.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.repair.org/history>

² <https://www.hagerty.com/media/news/new-right-to-repair-legislation-introduced-in-the-house-of-representatives/>

³ <https://pirg.org/campaigns/right-to-repair/>

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Washington CORE. Her role encompasses an extensive array of research topics, ranging from decarbonization business strategies and environmental policies in major economies to wastewater technologies, nuclear emergency responses, ESG financing, costly cell and gene therapy treatments, and emerging information and communication technologies. Employing a multifaceted approach, she also conducts comprehensive literature reviews and interview-based research, alongside insightful case studies, across these domains. Ms. Folake holds a BA in International Affairs from the University of Georgia.