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Restore net neutrality? Congress has an opportunity [Editorial]

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Proponents of net neutrality protest against Federal Communication Commission Chairman Ajit Pai outside the American Enterprise Institute before his arrival May 5, 2017 in Washington, DC. Appointed to the commission by President Barack Obama in 2012, Pai was elevated to the chairmanship of the FCC by U.S. President Donald Trump in January.

Photo: Chip Somodevilla, Staff / Getty Images

Congress has another chance to address the issue of net neutrality, and this time we urge lawmakers to get the issue of internet regulation right, despite deep partisan divisions in Washington.

The House Subcommittee on Communications and Technology, which includes Texas representatives Pete Olson, R-Sugar Land, and Marc Veasey, D-Fort Worth, has a hearing scheduled for Tuesday on the “Save the Internet Act of 2019” unveiled last week. We ask those two representatives to put consumers ahead of corporate interests.

As we've written before, internet service providers should treat everyone equally, from the largest online company to the smallest user. Early internet pioneers embraced this principle widely, and it's one worth preserving still. It's the reason why in 2015 the FCC decided to issue new rules requiring broadband providers not play favorites among companies vying to use the information superhighway. And it's why the FCC, acting under new leadership appointed by President Trump, was wrong to so quickly reverse course.

Without rules protecting net neutrality, companies who control access to the basic infrastructure of the internet, including Comcast, Texas-based AT&T, and other firms, could essentially turn the digital freeway into a toll road. No broadband firms should be able to speed one company's ramp onto internet and slow another's, or prevent one kind of content from reaching its audience but not another's. We've already seen this happen. In 2011, MetroPCS announced plans to only allow streaming video from YouTube over its 4G network and block all competitors. AT&T, Sprint and Verizon spent years blocking Google Wallet from being used over their networks because the service competed with one they had developed.

Telecoms shouldn't have the right to pick and choose the winners and losers over their networks. In the 21st century, internet access has become another must-have utility like electricity or gas and should be regulated like one, especially since it touches nearly every aspect of modern-day life.

But once Trump appointed a new FCC chairman in 2017, it rolled back rules subjecting broadband providers to a vastly streamlined version of the regulation familiar to utilities. The bill introduced last week in the House would restore those consumer protections.

The bill, which also has support in the Senate, codifies net neutrality rules such as no blocking or throttling into law. . It also would also put broadband providers under the jurisdiction of Title II of the Communications Act, which provides the legal basis to regulate those companies and ensure the internet superhighway remains a freeway for all legal content. .

The bill's a good start, and Republicans should embrace it. But Democrats, too, will have to remain open to compromise, as a one-sided bill will go nowhere. And that's a dead-end we can't afford.