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To close digital divide, lawmakers succeed when focused on education and transparency

As communication and information channels increasingly require high-speed internet access and smartphones, a substantial portion of Americans are at risk of falling behind. In attempts to close the digital divide, lawmakers have found the most success when their legislation focuses on two fundamentals of an informed society: education and transparency.

Specifically, according to a new study, Congressional bills aimed at improving internet access were more likely to become law when they focus on the educational benefits of such technology; separately, bills designed to increase transparency in the reporting of household internet access were also more successful. The study was based on a review of bills introduced to Congress between 1990–2020.

"We conducted this study to understand how legislators have been approaching digital equity policy since 1990, and also to learn what strategies might increase support for digital equity funding from both sides of the aisle," said Amy Gonzales, an associate professor in the UC Santa Barbara Department of Communication and associate director of the campus's Chicano Studies Institute . Doctoral student Jesse King co-authored the study for the [August 2023 issue](#) of Telecommunication Policy.

"Currently, if one house in a census block has internet access, the Federal Communications Commission counts that entire block as having access to the internet, which then makes it difficult for companies to get government funding to expand internet access into that underserved area," Gonzales explained as an example of transparency issues. "This is an issue of both social inequality and corporate competition, which perhaps explains the appeal to both the right and the left (sides of the political aisle).

Republican-sponsored bills were generally more likely to become law, the study found. Particularly when a bill referred to deregulation — such as easing regulations around the installation of broadband infrastructure — Republicans were more likely to come aboard as sponsors. Similarly, Republicans were also more likely to sponsor bills that mentioned funding for privacy or cybersecurity protections as well as bills about transparent internet access reporting.

Democrats were more likely to sponsor a bill that addressed internet and technology access when it included funding for community-based digital literacy programs. Also, the study indicated that there is slightly more evidence that Democrats would be more likely to sponsor bills that mentioned the educational benefits of technology-related legislation and funding. Overall, however, bills focused on education were more likely to be passed regardless of sponsorship.

The research also found that some legislative efforts were more likely to have bipartisan support than others, such as bills aiming to address internet access generally, or bills specifically for increasing the availability of high-speed broadband transmission.

For context, the authors added, 30% of Americans report feeling little to no confidence using their devices to perform everyday tasks online, such as banking or making doctor appointments, according to the Pew Research Center. Also, while more than 75% of Americans have internet access at home, clear disparities exist in terms of race, income and education level. For example, 80% of whites have in-home internet access, compared to 65% of Hispanics. Income and education divides are even wider: 57% of those who make less than $30,000 per year have internet access at home, compared to 92% of those who make $75,000 or more. Of people without a high school degree, 46% have in-home access; 94% of college graduates have home internet.

"The research may help policymakers, technology industry leaders and digital equity activists to frame future legislation to more effectively garner support," Gonzales said.

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