



Harvard Model Congress Boston 2024

The Digital Divide Update

By Caleb Thompson

As the 2024 election approaches, Joe Biden has championed his investments in infrastructure as strengths of his administration. On June 26, 2023, The White House divvied up \$42 billion among the nation's 50 states and U.S. territories to make access to high-speed broadband universal by 2030, as it launched a new publicity campaign for President Joe Biden's economic policies (Reuters, 2023). In the past, Broadband companies such as Verizon, Comcast, Charter Communications and AT&T have been reluctant to provide access to low-population, rural communities because the investments are expensive and the regions do not offer a lot of subscribers. This has led to estimates that there are some 8.5 million locations in the U.S. that lack access to broadband connections by Biden's administration. However, Biden is seeking to fill in gaps in coverage so that all Americans, including those in rural areas, have access to high-speed broadband internet. (Reuters, 2023).

There have also been several bills introduced in Congress to address issues of digital equity. On July 11, 2023, Roger Wicker, the Senior Republican Senator from Mississippi, introduced S. 2238: PLAN for Broadband Act. This bill is meant to be "A bill to direct the Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Communications and Information to develop a National Strategy to Close the Digital Divide, and for other purposes." (GovTrack, 2024). That a Republican proposed this bill suggests substantial bipartisan support for addressing the issues discussed in the briefing.

On July 27, 2023, Jeanne Shaheen, the Senior Democratic Senator from New Hampshire, introduced S. 2677: Small Business Broadband and Emerging Information Technology Enhancement Act of 2023. This bill is meant to be "A bill to improve certain programs of the Small Business Administration to better assist small business customers in accessing broadband technology, and for other purposes." (GovTrack, 2024). This bill expands upon the growing trend of seeking to provide access to broadband through local businesses.

On November 15, 2023, Markwayne Mullin, the Junior Republican Senator from Oklahoma, introduced S. 3321: Lowering Broadband Costs for Consumers Act of 2023. This bill is meant to be "A bill to require the Federal Communications Commission to ensure equitable and nondiscriminatory contributions to the mechanisms that preserve and advance universal service, to reduce the financial burden on consumers, and for other purposes." (GovTrack, 2024). This bill reflects growing concerns about the equity of broadband, especially in regards to access in rural areas.

According to the World Bank, expanding access to broadband internet across the world is one of the most efficient ways to grow developing economies and reduce inequality. According to the World Bank, “Broadband internet access is not a luxury, but a basic necessity for economic and human development in both developed and developing countries.” (World Bank, 2024). The World Bank estimates that raising internet access to just 75% of the population in all developing countries would add up to \$2 trillion USD to their GDP and create approximately 140 million new jobs around the world (World Bank, 2024). It will be important for the delegates to consider international investment, not only domestic investment, as a possible policy objective.

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