

MEMO TO PRESIDENT-ELECT BIDEN

CONNECTING AMERICA:

A RADICALLY PRAGMATIC BROADBAND AGENDA FOR JOE BIDEN'S FIRST 100 DAYS

President-Elect Biden ran on a commitment to be a President for all Americans, not just those who voted for him. To make good on that promise, he and his team will need to find opportunities for common ground and constructive compromise as they build their agenda for the first 100 days. One issue they would be smart to prioritize: **Getting every American connected to broadband.**

The COVID-19 pandemic, and the failed experiment in distance learning it forced upon our nations' schools, have underscored the urgent need to close our digital divide. Unlike many other issues, broadband policy offers real promise for bipartisan consensus because it cuts across traditional red-blue and urban-rural lines. Infrastructure deployment gaps are found primarily in rural and tribal areas. Broadband adoption rates are lowest among low-income households and in communities of color. Plus, common sense consumer protections like net neutrality rules and consumer privacy safeguards enjoy overwhelming bipartisan support.

In a comprehensive broadband bill, there would be something for everyone to get behind.

The Biden administration has an opportunity to make historic progress expanding broadband access and accelerating adoption. And Biden will find bipartisan partners in these goals, so long as the Administration resists activist demands for the dead-end path of government micromanagement and instead focuses on targeted spending, smart reforms, and dynamic public-private partnerships.

The incoming Administration needs a radically pragmatic agenda that builds on the progress already being made, while accelerating efforts to close the most difficult and persistent gaps that remain.

Here are some ideas for where they should start:

PROTECT CONSUMERS ONLINE

- ▶ **Pass a Permanent Net Neutrality Law.** To pass a broadband agenda that prepares us for the future, we first need to stop getting bogged down in dead-end fights from the past. For the last two decades, different versions of net neutrality have bounced between Congress, the Federal Communications Commission, the courts, and most recently the states, but the issue remains unresolved. While alarmist predictions about the imminent demise of [“the internet as we know it”](#) have proven unfounded, consumers and innovators all deserve the clarity and certainty of permanent net neutrality protections. The core principles – no blocking, no throttling, no paid prioritization – enjoy almost universal bipartisan support. President Biden and Congress should come together to [pass clear, permanent net neutrality protections](#) – while steering clear of the entirely unrelated (and much more controversial) idea of regulating the internet as a public utility under 1930s “common carrier” rules.
- **Protect Consumer Privacy.** American voters [overwhelmingly prefer](#) a federal privacy law to a patchwork of inconsistent, contradictory state laws. The new Administration should work with Congress to pass a comprehensive new set of privacy protections that apply consistently to every company that collects or uses consumer data. Sensitive data – such as health, financial, or location information – demands a higher level of protection, and the Federal Trade Commission and state Attorneys General need clear authority to police and punish data privacy violations.

CONNECT RURAL AMERICA

- **Make Historic Investments in Broadband Infrastructure.** Joe Biden’s campaign platform [called for investing \\$20 billion](#) in rural broadband. This funding is urgently needed. While [nearly \\$2 trillion](#) in private investment over the past 25 years have built networks that reach [95%](#) of American communities, market forces alone won’t be sufficient to attract private investment to get last-mile network infrastructure to every home in some remaining unserved pockets where low populations and difficult terrain make for much higher per-home deployment costs. A smart strategy won’t look to replace private funding, but will instead leverage even greater private investment by matching capable providers with project-based assistance on a transparent, competitive basis. Republicans will fight Biden on any number of spending priorities, but rural broadband programs may be an exception, since much of the funding would flow toward rural, Republican-held districts and states.

- **Set Clear Priorities.** The Biden Administration will be keen to avoid the mis-steps of earlier federal broadband initiatives, such as the Commerce Department's Broadband Technology Opportunities Program, which [squandered millions in 2009 Recovery Act funding](#) building duplicative broadband networks in communities that already had high-speed fiber infrastructure. This time around, federal funding must be targeted to truly unserved areas – those where high-speed broadband isn't yet available. We can't ask Americans living in broadband deserts to wait even longer while taxpayer funds get diverted to subsidize networks in areas that already have high-speed service.
- **Let Every Technology – and Every Capable Provider – Compete for Funds.** Many federal broadband programs are hamstrung by outdated, dial-up era eligibility rules that actively discourage many capable providers from participating. With less competition for federal funds, progress is slowed and taxpayer dollars don't stretch as far. Bipartisan bills [introduced earlier this year](#) in both the House and Senate proposed to scrap these obsolete, anti-competitive Eligible Telecommunication Carrier restrictions; the incoming Administration should embrace these bipartisan reforms. Federal broadband programs should set clear thresholds for speed and latency – and then allow every capable provider and every kind of broadband technology (fiber, cable, fixed wireless, etc.) that can meet these standards to apply and compete for funding.
- **Demand Real Accountability.** Government watchdogs have documented how mismanagement and poor oversight undermined earlier federal rural broadband programs. For example, the USDA's Rural Utility Service promised in 2011 that its \$3.5 billion in stimulus funding would connect 7 million homes – but [ended up connecting only a few hundred thousand](#). "We are left with a program that spent \$3 billion, and we really don't know what became of it," [concluded](#) the GAO. We need much stronger oversight this time: every provider applying for federal funding must commit to connecting a specific number of homes by a certain date – and should be forced to return the funding if they fail to meet these commitments.

ACCELERATE BROADBAND ADOPTION

- **Understand the Challenge.** While broadband service is available in 95% of U.S. neighborhoods, only 73% of American households subscribe to home broadband. This "adoption gap" is rooted in a complex set of underlying factors, exacerbated by digital literacy gaps and a lack of understanding in some quarters of the opportunities opened up by home broadband service. In fact, [60% of Americans](#) who don't have home broadband cite a lack of interest or need as their primary reason for not signing up, while [fewer than 20%](#) cite affordability as the main obstacle. [Sen. Ed Markey \(D-MA\) introduced legislation](#) earlier this year aimed at helping us better understand the barriers to broadband adoption, by authorizing new experiments and pilot programs and gathering more data on the challenge. The Biden Administration should embrace that proposal as a starting point, and recognize that broadband adoption is a complex and nuanced challenge.

- **Build on Models that Work.** Most major broadband providers have offered [low cost broadband programs](#) for years to eligible low-income customers. For example, the largest of these programs (Comcast's [Internet Essentials](#)) has connected roughly 8 million low-income Americans since 2011, offering home broadband for just under \$10 per month. These initiatives offer important lessons that need to be internalized into federal broadband adoption efforts – most critically, the importance of wrapping discounts or subsidies with comprehensive digital literacy training and comprehensive community outreach programs. The shortest path toward boosting broadband adoption is to build on top of models that are working – not tearing them down and starting from scratch.
- **Subsidize Low-Income Broadband Adoption.** Broadband providers' [low-income adoption initiatives](#) have brought home broadband service to millions of low-income families nationwide. Modernizing low-income FCC programs to support standalone fixed broadband service – and ensuring the program is open to every capable provider meeting defined speed thresholds – would further help vulnerable families, ensuring that every American can afford home broadband service. Democrats in Congress fought to [include a \\$3 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit](#) in the COVID-19 relief package passed in December, which will offer a subsidy of up to \$50 per month help low-income and unemployed Americans stay connected during this pandemic. This is a welcome short-term solution, but Congress must remember that broadband adoption challenges will persist long after the COVID-19 emergency has subsided.



The Progressive Policy Institute is a catalyst for policy innovation and political reform based in Washington, D.C. Its mission is to create radically pragmatic ideas for moving America beyond ideological and partisan deadlock.

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Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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