

<http://www.politico.com/>

Republicans clash over privacy protection

By Eliza Krigman

10/13/11 12:46 PM EDT

Republicans clashed Thursday over how far the government should go to protect consumer privacy online.

"I think it's time that the Congress of the United States pass a strong, explicit, privacy protection Internet law," Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas), co-chairman of the Congressional Privacy Caucus, said at the start of a House hearing on consumer attitudes about the use of personal data on the Web. "We have over 240 million Americans that use the Internet every day and those consumers are entitled to privacy."

But Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) countered that the government is all too capable of overreaching.

"Our foundation for policy here should be flexible" for the "beneficial use of data" that will "protect against real harms and empower people instead of government," she said at the Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade Subcommittee hearing.

Blackburn argued that burdensome government regulations could waste the "natural resource" of consumer data that fuels business online.

Subcommittee Chairwoman Rep. Mary Bono Mack (R-Calif.), who has held a series of hearings on this issue, indicated that her mind was still open about the right balance between industry self-regulation and government rules.

"Despite everything that I have heard in our previous hearings, I still remain somewhat skeptical right now of both industry and government," Bono Mack said. "Frankly, I don't believe industry has proven that it's doing enough to protect American consumers, while government, unfortunately, tends to overreach whenever it comes to new regulations."

The panel's ranking member, Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.), was more skeptical of industry efforts — and open to government taking on a bigger role.

"Consumers want and expect privacy whether they're online hopping from website to website or buying a few things at a chain grocery store," Butterfield said. "But sometimes the privacy consumers expect isn't respected."

"[A] national baseline privacy law is the best way to ensure consumers' basic, common-sense, and permanent rights over the collection of the use of their information," Butterfield said.

Linda Woolley, testifying on behalf of the Digital Advertising Alliance, the group behind the industry self-regulation program, rejected the need for government interference.

“The industry is doing a better job than government,” Woolley said. “We are nimble and we can move quickly.” The DAA created and began to implement its self-regulation in less than year, a timeframe the government couldn’t match, Woolley claimed.

Much of the discussion centered on whether consumers even understand how to protect their data in the complicated and fast-paced world of online advertising.

“Consumers just don’t know what the risks are,” said Pam Dixon, executive director of the World Privacy Forum, which favors privacy legislation but doesn’t believe it will clear Congress in the near future.

“We all drive cars,” she quipped, “but we are not all mechanics.”