

Republicans are still pushing for child safety laws, while Democrats wonder if a weakened FTC can enforce them

Members of a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee met Wednesday to discuss what's typically a highly bipartisan topic: protecting kids online. But in a far-from-typical political climate, the mood was tense and confrontational.

Republican lawmakers are eager to revive a handful of bipartisan bills like the Kids Online Safety Act, which House Republican leadership blocked at the finish line last year. Many Democrats on the panel support these proposals, calling them an urgent response to a social crisis. But they're raising a new question: as the Trump administration ignores congressional statutes and Supreme Court precedent to gut the federal government, will there be anyone left to enforce these laws?

Last week, President Donald Trump abruptly – and under current law, illegally – attempted to fire the two sitting Democratic commissioners on the Federal Trade Commission, Rebecca Kelly Slaughter and Alvaro Bedoya. The move left two Republicans on the commission, with one more expected to soon be confirmed. Like many agencies across the federal government, the FTC has seen recent staff cuts, though in far smaller numbers than many of the most prominent targets of the right. Even in the minority party, Slaughter and Bedoya warn that their removals will thwart transparency and accountability for any decisions made in their absence, and they're planning to sue to return

to their work. Without dissenting voices in the room, Slaughter and Bedoya have warned, there's no one to push back and illustrate what alternative paths the FTC could have taken, or provide important context to the agency's decisions. "I'm going to be even more worried about actions taken to withdraw settlements, modify settlements, [and] votes taken to not sue a company," Bedoya told reporters outside the hearing room. "If there's an action brought up to the commission, and the commissioners say no, that never becomes public."

"We had in place what was needed to protect our children," ranking member of the commerce subcommittee Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) said in her opening remarks. "And that's why I am absolutely furious right now that there has been this effort to fire the two members of the FTC." The Democratic minority invited Slaughter to testify alongside witnesses invited by Republicans, including representatives from the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), National Center on Sexual Exploitation (NCOSE), and Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) – the latter, as one Democrat pointed out, contributed to Project 2025. Bedoya, though not formally invited, sat behind his colleague in the hearing room.

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Republicans painted the FTC firings as a distraction. "This hearing is about children. It's not about what's going on here in Washington, DC," said full committee Chair Brett Guthrie (R-KY). When reporters outside the hearing room asked about the attempted firings, subcommittee Chair Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) said he's "focused on the hearing today." Rep. Erin Houchin (R-IN) apologized to parents in the audience "for the things that are being taken away from this conversation not being focused on protecting children, but instead on someone's job at the FTC." Houchin complained that a reporter had stopped her in the hallway to ask about the agency. "Shame on the media if the only thing they cover from today is the FTC,

because children are dying,” she said.

But Democrats argued that laws are useless without effective enforcement, which they believe is under threat. The FTC would be primarily in charge of enforcing two major bills that passed through the House Energy and Commerce Committee last year: KOSA and the Children and Teens’ Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA 2.0) “We can talk about the importance of passing new legislation here in this hearing,” said KOSA co-sponsor Kathy Castor (D-FL). But she questioned how they could regain trust in Republicans “ if you take the cops off the beat, you give the Big Tech CEOs a front row seat to the inauguration, [and] you block the KOSA and COPPA that was hammered out over years of work in this committee?”

The questions about rule of law and who will enforce it extend far beyond the FTC. In empowering Elon Musk’s pet project, the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Trump has deputized the richest man in the world to slash the federal workforce, and seek to shut down agencies created by congressional statute. Trump has asserted power over what are supposed to be independent agencies, including the FTC, and loyalists he’s appointed to run them have so far welcomed him to do so. Many experts say we already are or soon could be in a constitutional crisis, as Trump appears willing to flout everything from a law seeking to ban TikTok to court orders.

Rep. Frank Pallone (D-NJ), ranking member of the full committee, even pointed out that Republicans were the reason KOSA didn’t pass last year. “Let’s not kid the people here to suggest that these bills are going to become law,” he said. “The bottom line is we passed KOSA and we passed COPPA out of this committee last session and the House Republican leadership refused to bring these laws to the floor. And you know why? They’re in the pocket of Big Tech. And Big Tech does not care at all about kids.”

KOSA and COPPA 2.0 both garnered criticism that, as written,

they could infringe on speech and privacy. But this criticism could extend to virtually any child safety law.

Slaughter echoed Democrats' sentiment to reporters after the hearing. "You can't meaningfully address kids online safety in bills that would empower the FTC to enforce kids online safety, if you don't talk about whether the FTC is a functional body consistent with the design of Congress," she said.

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