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For years, Ajit Pai lobbed criticism about the Obama-era Federal Communications Commission from his largely powerless position as a Republican commissioner on the Democratic-controlled agency.

But since President Donald Trump put Pai in charge of the FCC shortly after Inauguration Day, the new chairman has used his authority to slash regulations, curtail the agency's reach and create a Trumpified version of the nation's telecom regulator.

The roughly 100-day frenzy of deregulation at the FCC marks a bright spot for the Trump administration, which has been hampered in other areas like repealing Obamacare. And Pai shows no signs of slowing down, teeing up a takedown of the signature FCC achievement of the Obama years: net neutrality rules designed to ensure internet service providers treat all web traffic equally.

His free-market perspective has endeared him to powerful allies in the conservative movement like anti-tax activist Grover Norquist. At one of his weekly meetings with conservatives, Norquist told the crowd that Pai is the most important appointment Trump has made aside from Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, sources said.

"There's a lot to be said about Trump, but at the core of the Trump agenda is smaller government, fundamental reforms, less regulation," said Jeff Eisenach, the head of the Trump transition team for the FCC. "I think we are at a reform moment, and I think that Ajit is moving down that path."

Pai, who joined the commission in 2012, had no need for on-the-job training when he assumed the chairmanship in January. Politically savvy and an expert in telecom policy, he's executed a vision for a scaled-back FCC, removing or weakening a slew of rules that restricted ISPs and major media companies.

In a speech at the American Enterprise Institute on Friday, Pai said he's spent his first 100 days advancing his policy priorities of closing the digital divide, increasing transparency at the commission and removing unnecessary regulatory burdens.

"I'm pleased that we've gotten off to a strong start. But I would stress that that's all it is: a start. A good beginning is no guarantee of ultimate success," Pai said. "There's a lot more to do. And I'm looking forward to doing it."

The chairman halted the FCC's data security rules from taking effect in March, and cheered when Congress repealed the agency's privacy rules the same month. He also moved to deregulate the \$45 billion business broadband market, and this month will kick off a review of the agency's media ownership rules, with the goal of eliminating outdated regulations.

As for net neutrality, Pai wants to downsize the agency's oversight even further. His proposal, which he unveiled in April at a speech co-hosted by limited government group FreedomWorks, would weaken the FCC's authority over internet providers like Comcast and Verizon by removing the legal underpinnings of the Obama-era rules.

The FCC will vote May 18 on his plan, which also seeks comment on whether rules to stop ISPs from blocking or slowing web traffic or creating pay-for-play internet fast lanes are necessary at all.

Pai's proposal quickly ignited a firestorm of opposition from Democrats and net neutrality activists, who plan to fight hard to keep the current version of the rules in place. Anticipating the backlash, Pai has used his time in the chairman's office to quietly build his own conservative army of supporters. He's pursued what amounts to a conservative charm offensive, amping up his partisan rhetoric,

granting frequent interviews to right-wing media outlets and holding private meetings with groups like the Heritage Foundation and Koch-affiliated Americans for Prosperity.

The chairman's supporters are making sure his message isn't drowned out in the noisy debate. American Commitment, which is run by Phil Kerpen, an Americans for Prosperity alum, already launched an online commenting campaign. Kerpen said he'll likely rent email lists to push out a message urging the FCC to repeal the rules, to counter the "clicktivism" he expects from the left on the issue.

Critics of Pai argue his push to repeal the net neutrality rules is part of a broader agenda aimed at helping established players in the industry he regulates. His recent order effectively loosening TV station ownership restrictions, for example, is seen as benefiting the major players in the broadcast industry as they eye big mergers.

In his first month as chairman, Pai also removed a proposal to revamp the cable set-top box market and revoked the ability of nine companies to provide subsidized broadband to low-income people through the Lifeline program.

"He's doing absolutely nothing to promote competition," said Gigi Sohn, a former aide to Pai's Democratic predecessor, Tom Wheeler. "Everything he's doing is to help incumbents, particularly the largest media companies in the world."

But supporters argue that Pai's deregulatory bent is all about accomplishing his stated top priority — closing the so-called digital divide between those with internet access and those without. The first vote the commission took with Pai as chairman was to allow New York to combine federal funds with state money to support the deployment of broadband in parts of the state that are difficult to serve. He also tweaked a government-imposed condition on Charter Communications' merger with Time Warner Cable and Bright House Networks, to push the cable giant to expand its network to households that don't have internet connections.

Pai argues his push to roll back the net neutrality regulations will encourage companies to build out their networks, create jobs for Americans who do the building and boost competition by encouraging new companies to enter the market.

"You can't just wave a wand and broadband networks magically appear. They cost millions of dollars to build and operate," said Jonathan Spalter, president of the trade group USTelecom. "Many of his early proposals — including changing net neutrality rules — have been aimed at ensuring broadband networks are built to reach more people at faster speeds." - **Politico**

