

Democrats Could Make Deal With Trump to Cut Drug Prices—or Not

By Shira Stein | November 7, 2018 12:30PM ET

A deal to bring down drug costs may gain steam in the next Congress as the new Democratic House majority prepares to carry out its legislative agenda and President Donald Trump pushes forward on his drug-pricing blueprint.

Drug pricing is one of the rare policy areas where Democrats and Trump can find common ground. Democrats used drug pricing as part of their closing arguments for the midterms and Trump released a [new proposal to reduce some drug prices](#) just ahead of the elections. Trump cited drug prices at his post-election news conference as an area where he can work with House Republicans.

“The one thing that we know Donald Trump wants is wins,” Dan Judy, a research analyst at Northstar Opinion Research, said. Signing bills is a victory for Trump, and “if he sees an opportunity to work with the Democrats to do something on prescription drugs, he could do it.”

To strike a deal, they’ll need to overcome political obstacles. Democrats will have to balance their desire to prove they can deliver on promises to their voters with a reluctance to give Trump a political victory going into 2020. And Trump will have to overcome the mainstream of his party, leery of touching the issue of drug pricing in the face of the [millions they receive](#) from pharmaceutical companies each election cycle.

They’ll also be wary of working with each other, with Democrats pushing hard on oversight of the Trump administration’s agenda and the president’s past of blowing up a potential compromise on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program to protect young undocumented immigrants from deportation.

Making changes to drug pricing “would be seen as something that benefits Trump’s America just as much as Obama’s America,” Rep. [Peter Welch](#) (D-Vt.) said in an interview.

Calculus for Members

Democrats taking back the House promises to break the logjam of drug-pricing legislation, Welch said.

Drug pricing is a top legislative priority for Democrats and they hope Trump will be willing to work with them, Henry Connelly, a spokesman for Rep. [Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.), said in an interview. Pelosi is in line to become speaker of the House, succeeding [Paul Ryan](#) (R-Wis.)

“In the Ryan Congress they circled the wagons to protect pharmacy pricing. They didn’t want these bills coming to the floor,” Welch said.

Democrats are starting to realize that voters care more about health-care costs than access and coverage, which is why they're focusing more on drug pricing, Anna Greenberg, managing partner at Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research, said at an Alliance for Health Policy event.

Voters have the most direct interaction with the costs of prescription drugs compared to other health care costs, Judy said at the same event.

Democrats will likely talk about drug pricing as a gateway to stabilize Obamacare, but they won't tackle the actual issue of drug pricing in the first 100 days of the new Congress because it is too tied to Trump's agenda, Kavita Patel, former director of policy for the Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and Public Engagement in the Obama Administration, said in an interview. Patel is a primary care internist at Johns Hopkins Medicine and a nonresident fellow with the Brookings Institute Center for Health Policy.

Although Republicans have wary of drug pricing measures, Republican Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) (R-Ky.) said he "can't imagine drug prices won't be on [the] agenda" of the next Congress.

Robert Blendon, a health policy professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, doesn't expect Senate Republicans will be eager to vote on a drug-pricing measure because elected Republicans are big beneficiaries of money from pharmaceutical companies.

Even if voters are "complaining about drug prices, that doesn't mean you're going to get a lot of political support for a particular method of reducing drug prices," Michael Cannon, director of health policy studies at the Cato Institute, said in an interview.

Working With Trump?

Democrats could potentially get legislation on drug pricing passed through both chambers by working with Trump.

Trump, Pelosi and Senate Democratic Leader [Charles Schumer](#) (D-N.Y.) have tried to work together on compromises before. They attempted to strike a deal on funding the government in September 2017 that would have also meant a compromise on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, but it fell through.

Trump isn't ideological in the traditional left and right terms, Greenberg said. Trump's base is so devoted to him that he could sign a drug-pricing bill passed by Democrats, and he wouldn't lose any voters, she added, because it would be seen as the Trump prescription-drug plan.

That doesn't mean Democrats will necessarily want to work with Trump.

The president has the ability to go radioactive on Democrats, so it's hard for them to work with him, a former Republican Senate aide said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The results of health care changes are “owned by who is said to be in charge,” Thomas Miller, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, said in an interview.

The last thing Democrats want to do is take a potent electoral issue like drug prices and hand the president a win on it, Doug Holtz-Eakin, president of the American Action Forum, said in an interview.

Democrats want to show their voters they can get things done, Harvard’s Blendon said in an interview. Even if they pass a measure through only one chamber, Democrats can argue it would be law if they had control of both, he added.

Democrats have to decide if they want to give the win on lowering drug prices to Trump and show voters they can pass legislation, or refuse to work with him and persuade voters to elect more Democrats so they can pass legislation.

“It’s going to be more what we do than what we say,” Welch said. “That’s how we earn the trust of the American voters.”

If there is gridlock in Washington over drug pricing, watch for states to come up with their own proposals, Joel Ario, managing director of Manatt Health, said in an interview. Ario is the former director of the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Health Insurance Exchanges.

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