



Cornyn Positions As Drug Pricing Policy Player, Looks To 2020

By Rachel Cohrs

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The Senate Finance Committee kicks off its first hearing on prescription drug pricing Tuesday (Jan. 29), but Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) already tweeted that a future topic of investigation will be abuses of the rebate system by pharmacy benefit managers -- an announcement that would typically be made by committee chairman Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA). Cornyn's recent active role in drug pricing signals that he is seeking to be more involved in the issue as he prepares for a potentially competitive 2020 race.

Grassley voiced concern about the rebate system earlier this month, and [told Inside Health Policy](#) that he plans to discuss a PBM transparency bill authored by the committee's ranking Democrat, Sen. Ron Wyden (OR), with the committee. Cornyn told *IHP* that he thought the committee's impending investigation was obvious when he made the announcement.

"I didn't think it was a secret," Cornyn said. "We are going to do an investigation over the abuses of the rebate process and the pricing of prescription drugs and a lack of transparency in terms of the benefits going to consumers. I think there are a lot of problems there that we will be looking into and offering legislation to try to fix," Cornyn said.

Cornyn termed out of his role as Senate Majority Whip last session. He is still part of Senate GOP leadership in an unelected capacity and is being groomed to be the next majority leader, *The Hill* first reported. Brandon Rottinghaus, a political science professor at the University of Houston, said that Cornyn has more leeway to break protocol because of his prominence.

"He's earned the right to jump the gun on election issues. Clearly, if he were to be the type that did this all the time that would be a different story, but he's not. He's a play-by-the-book, fall-in-line Republican. He's not in jeopardy of losing friends from this," Rottinghaus said.

Beyond announcing the investigation, Cornyn has made a point of highlighting drug pricing issues on his Twitter account, which he personally runs. He posted a photo with HHS Secretary Alex Azar flaunting a discussion on "ways to reform the American health care system to lower costs for Texans and all Americans," and has posted about several news articles and op-ed pieces related to drug-pricing issues.

Cornyn was not very active on drug pricing in the past and he could benefit from adding it to his set of campaign issues, said Cal Jillson, a professor of political science at Southern Methodist University.

"[Drug pricing] is not something he is known for, or even has worked on quietly behind scenes in a legislative way. Can you emerge from a cold start as an influential person? It's something people care about, and if he could make it part of his brand, it could be positive," Jillson said.

Staking out positions on widely popular issues like lowering drug prices will be crucial for Cornyn as he prepares for a 2020 re-election run after his colleague, Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX), nearly lost his 2018 bid for a second term to Democratic phenom and former Rep. Beto O'Rourke. O'Rourke has not announced his intentions for 2020, but is widely reported to be considering a presidential bid.

Regardless of O'Rourke's decision, Cornyn said he is taking his re-election race seriously and reminding party leaders that the GOP cannot take Texas for granted in 2020.

"I'm visiting with a number of the Texas delegation who were very concerned with what happened in the midterms, as am I, and what that means in terms of Texas politics and national politics. If Texas turns back to a Democratic

state, which it used to be, then we will never elect another Republican in my lifetime,” Cornyn said. — *Rachel Cohrs* (rcohrs@iwnews.com)

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