

THUNE RISES TO SENATE MAJORITY LEADER AS GOP TRIFECTA READIES CONSERVATIVE HEALTH CARE AGENDA

Senate Republicans' election of John Thune (R-SD) to serve as majority leader next Congress elevates a seasoned health care policy expert to help drive GOP priorities as part of a Republican trifecta with President-elect Donald Trump through an anticipated reconciliation package early next year.

Thune has been a champion of rural health issues and telehealth expansion, and he has collaborated with other policymakers on bills to improve pharmacy benefit manager transparency, reform the 340B program, and address Medicare Advantage (MA) prior authorization requirements. Like many Republicans on Capitol Hill, he's a staunch opponent of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), a vocal critic of abortion, and was outspoken against mask mandates for children during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The leadership election promotes Thune from Senate minority whip to majority leader next year, succeeding current Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY).

Thune's ascension to Senate majority leader offers the GOP a captain who's spent over a decade on the Senate Finance Committee, which has jurisdiction over Medicare and Medicaid policy. Thune is expected to prioritize party unity while largely deferring to committee leadership on contentious health care issues like the expiring ACA premium tax credits. He has been on the Finance Committee for almost 15 years and has a deep understanding of health care policy. Colleagues describe Thune as "thoughtful and pragmatic, and he understands the complexity of health care."

Thune's website advocates private market solutions. "We need to focus on solutions that will help make health care more affordable for all Americans, rather than expand the government's role in providing health care," the health care section of Thune's website says. "I support proposals that would make the private insurance market more competitive and ensure individuals and families have choices when it comes to their health care needs."

With Republicans lined up to control the House, Senate and Presidency next year, they're poised to advance conservative priorities aimed at reducing health care costs -- which could include reforms to the ACA, introducing work requirements for Medicaid, and potentially repealing President Joe Biden's Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which gave Medicare the ability to negotiate drug prices with pharmaceutical companies.

Thune has also advocated electronic prior authorization reforms. He notably introduced the *Improving Seniors' Timely Access to Care Act of 2024* (S.4532) with Sen. Roger Marshall (R-KS), aiming to solidify CMS' January final MA electronic prior authorization rule into law. This legislation would require all payers--Medicare Advantage plans, state Medicaid programs, and marketplace plans--to implement electronic prior authorization systems, reduce prior authorization decision times by 50%, and establish a seamless interface for sharing clinical and claims data when patients switch plans.

With 54 Senate cosponsors, the bill's sponsors and lobbyists are pushing for its inclusion in a potential year-end health care package. However, health care policy experts anticipate that Republicans may wait to advance substantive legislation until they have full control next year, making a robust year-end health care package less likely and increasing the chances of a Republican-led reconciliation bill in the next session.