

Waxman: Panel Can Work on Health Care, Energy Overhauls at Same Time

By Drew Armstrong, CQ Staff

Incoming House Energy and Commerce Chairman [Henry A. Waxman](#) built his recent reputation on oversight, but for the 111th Congress he promises a broad agenda of health care and energy policy overhauls.

Over the last two years, Waxman has been a dogged critic of the Bush administration, the drug industry and even professional sports from his perch as chairman of the Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

As the next chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, the Democrat is trying to move beyond his reputation as an advocate and critic and return to what he sees as his roots as a legislator.

At a speech Monday sponsored by the [Prescription Project](#), a consumer advocacy group, Waxman promised to immediately take on health care and energy overhauls.

"I think we need to do both at the same time," he said. "We expect both to be very active."

Waxman couched his argument in economic terms. The economy "depends on how we resolve the health care issue," he said. "But the economy [also] depends on the new jobs that will be created by dealing with energy," he added.

On a health care overhaul, Waxman echoed the position of other top Democrats in the House and Senate, saying that he would take his cues from the Obama administration.

"This is the time, this is the opportunity that has eluded us, and we simply will not fail," he said in his first major health policy address since House Democrats voted in November to give him the Energy and Commerce gavel next year.

While the Senate has thus far taken the lead in writing a bill, Waxman said the House would not be left out. "We'll have our own House bill," he said, adding that he was still debating putting out a position paper on his own intentions for health care, as Senate Finance Chairman [Max Baucus](#), D-Mont., recently did.

Waxman's eagerness to tackle domestic policy caught at least one new member off guard during the Californian's campaign to topple Energy and Commerce Chairman [John D. Dingell](#), D-Mich.

"One of these new members said to me, 'I really didn't know you had any interest in health care. I thought all you were interested in was baseball,'" Waxman recalled, referring to the oversight hearings he held early this year on steroid use. "I'm not particularly a sports fan," he added.

"I think that went more to the question of those who knew me only as chairman of the Oversight Committee, which meant that I was trying to present an issue for public attention," he said.

Waxman took pains Monday to remind the audience of his experience as a legislator, and even a bipartisan one. When he chaired Energy and Commerce's Health Subcommittee from 1979 to 1994, he worked with Republicans to move important health and consumer legislation.

"Each one of those bills had at least some Republican support," he said. His record included work on laws related to generic drug approvals () and nutrition labeling ().

Still a Watchdog

Waxman said that although he would not give up his role as a watchdog, he wants to write health care legislation that is politically achievable.

"What to me is clearly the best approach is what we can pass, and that secures the goal of universal coverage, sensible controls on cost and assurances of quality care," Waxman said.

Waxman defeated Dingell in a 137-122 vote by the Democratic Caucus on Nov. 20. He said that Dingell will still have a role on the committee, as chairman emeritus.

"We all can benefit from his leadership, and we want him to play a very active role on the issues that are before us," Waxman said.

But it is unclear how much influence Dingell will actually have on the committee. It is also uncertain what will happen to Dingell's current staff of 85. Waxman might bring in new personnel from the Oversight Committee and elsewhere, or he might offer jobs to some current Dingell aides. "We're trying to figure out all the staffing needs of the committee," Waxman said.

Dingell's committee aides have declined to comment on what might happen, though it is likely that many would find jobs in the Obama administration or in other congressional offices.

There has been talk that Dingell would challenge Health Subcommittee Chairman [Frank Pallone Jr.](#), D-N.J., for his gavel. Dingell spokeswoman Jodi Seth would not comment on the speculation.

Following Dingell's loss of the chairmanship, Pallone sent a letter to fellow committee Democrats asking them to support him. An aide to Pallone said Monday that his office had not heard anything from Dingell. Waxman also said he did not know what Dingell might do.

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