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Democrats Oust Longtime Leader of House Panel

By [JOHN M. BRODER](#)

WASHINGTON — Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#) wrested the chairmanship of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee from Representative [John D. Dingell](#) on Thursday in a coup that is expected to accelerate passage of energy, climate and health legislation backed by President-elect [Barack Obama](#).

Mr. Waxman, 69, of California, who mounted a quiet but devastatingly effective two-week campaign against his longtime Democratic colleague, won the chairmanship with a 137-to-122 vote in the Democratic Caucus. The vote was secret, but many allies of Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) backed Mr. Waxman's move, and several members said they had voted on the assumption that Ms. Pelosi had tacitly approved.

Democrats also read the signals coming from the president-elect's [transition office](#), which this week announced the intention to name Philip Schiliro, a longtime aide to Mr. Waxman, as the White House director of Congressional relations.

The takeover marked the fall of a third long-serving member of Congress in the last two weeks. Senator [Ted Stevens](#), 85, Republican of Alaska, lost his re-election bid after a federal fraud conviction. Senator [Robert C. Byrd](#), 91, Democrat of West Virginia, stepped aside as chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee last week.

The ouster of Mr. Dingell, of Michigan, was another blow to the reeling American auto industry, which learned Thursday that it would not get any financial assistance from Congress until it showed how it could be profitable again. Mr. Dingell, who represents a suburban Detroit district, has been the industry's most stalwart defender in Congress, having slowed or blocked many safety and environmental standards that the auto companies argued they could not meet.

Some in the industry quaked at the ascension of Mr. Waxman, whom they consider an "irrational environmental zealot," in the words of David Cole, chairman of the Center for Automotive Research in Ann Arbor, Mich.

At a meeting of the House Democratic Caucus on Thursday morning, Mr. Dingell and his supporters delivered an impassioned plea to let him keep his post as the senior Democrat on the committee, which he has held for 28 years. But Mr. Waxman's argument that he would be a more vigorous and effective advocate for Mr. Obama's agenda won the day. Mr. Dingell, 82, has been hobbled by health problems and is in a wheelchair recovering from knee-replacement surgery.

Mr. Waxman described the battle with Mr. Dingell as painful, but praised his rival's half century of service in

Congress. Without directly criticizing Mr. Dingell, Mr. Waxman said he would move more quickly on the president-elect's priorities.

"I went before the caucus and argued we needed a change in leadership and the public was clamoring for the change," Mr. Waxman said in an interview after the vote. He said he hoped to move forward on comprehensive climate and health care legislation, simultaneously if possible.

"I think we need to act on both issues even though they're complex and may be contentious," Mr. Waxman said. "When a new president is elected there's often a limited opportunity to get through major bills that he's backed."

Mr. Dingell was surrounded by staff members after the vote, some of them in tears, others furious. He did not speak immediately to reporters but issued a statement later recognizing that he had been swept away by brisk winds blowing at both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue.

"Well, this was clearly a change year, and I congratulate my colleague Henry Waxman on his success today," Mr. Dingell said. "I will work closely with him on the issues facing the Energy and Commerce Committee and for a smooth transition."

Representative John Yarmuth, a Kentucky Democrat completing his first term in Congress, said he and many other new members were sympathetic to Mr. Dingell, but believed it was time for new leadership.

"Many of the people who were elected with me didn't come here to serve 30 years," said Mr. Yarmuth, 61. "There is a sense of urgency among many people in my class. We came here to make some dramatic changes."

Mr. Waxman represents Santa Monica, Beverly Hills and well-to-do areas of West Los Angeles. He has long championed clean air legislation and measures to strengthen consumer protections. He supports tougher nursing home regulation, increased federal support for disease research and subsidies for prescription drugs for the poor and the elderly.

As ranking member and chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, he has been Congress's grand inquisitor, conducting high-profile investigations of Wall Street, Major League Baseball, Pentagon contractors and the tobacco industry. He has also served as the chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Health.

As oversight committee chairman, he had a perch to make trouble for the administration and federal agencies. As the new chairman of the Energy and Commerce Committee, he has a chance to make history as an ambitious new president takes office.

Mr. Dingell has been the top Democrat on the committee since 1981 and has been in Congress since 1955, winning the seat in a special election after his father died in office. In February, Mr. Dingell will become the longest-serving member in the history of the House. He is married to Deborah Insley Dingell, a longtime senior executive at the General Motors Corporation.

Many lawmakers and lobbyists consider the Energy and Commerce Committee to be the most influential

panel in either house of Congress, one that handles, by some estimates, all or parts of two-thirds of the legislation moving through the House. Three committees in the Senate share jurisdiction over bills relating to energy, environment and commerce, all of which pass through the single House committee.

Outside the committee room is a huge [NASA](#) photograph of Earth taken from space. Mr. Dingell is fond of pointing to it in answer to questions about his committee's jurisdiction.

Scott Segal, a lobbyist at Bracewell & Giuliani who represents a variety of energy-related interests, said that industry had no doubt that Mr. Waxman would pursue a more aggressive path on [climate change](#) legislation than Mr. Dingell would have. But he also said that, as chairman, Mr. Waxman would be constrained in what he could actually accomplish.

Mr. Segal said Mr. Waxman would have to carefully weigh the economic impact of any global warming bill he advanced.

Mr. Segal said a well-written bill could both reduce global warming and create millions of new jobs. "An improperly crafted bill might scare investment out of the energy sector entirely," he said.

Micheline Maynard contributed reporting from Detroit.

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