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POLITICS

Dingell Buried

Henry Waxman's victory is the biggest gift Obama could have asked for.

By Christopher Beam

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Out: Rep. John Dingell of Michigan, the tough, cantankerous *eminence grise* of the House Democratic caucus (he's 82), who was so deferential to Detroit as chairman of the House energy and commerce committee that Lee Iacocca [once said](#) he "stood up for the auto industry beyond the call of duty." In: Rep. Henry Waxman of California, the tough, mustachioed *eminence slightly less grise* of House Democrats (he's 69) known for his relentless investigations and aggressive proposals for combating climate change. Waxman's mustache—[it even has a nickname](#)—haunts Rick Wagoner's dreams.

Barack Obama's own transition team could not have hoped for a better outcome. In fact, there are signs it did more than just hope.

Dingell's ouster came after the Democrats' Policy and Steering Committee voted 25-22 in favor of Waxman's candidacy. In charge of the steering committee is Waxman's fellow California Democrat, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. And ousting the leader of the House's most powerful panel—environmental issues, health care, and consumer protection all fall under commerce's purview—is generally not done without permission from the top.

Of course, Waxman and Dingell did their part. As early as the 1980s, Waxman was fighting the attempts of then-Chairman Dingell, working with the Reagan administration, to weaken auto-emissions standards. Dingell, meanwhile, quashed Waxman's acid-rain legislation. More recently, Dingell's 2007 pro-coal, anti-regulatory energy independence legislation prompted Waxman to circulate a letter signed by 11 fellow committee members: "We have serious concerns about the direction the Committee is heading."

At the same time, Dingell could have been helpful to Obama as chairman on some issues. He's been a stalwart liberal almost across the board. He helped to pass Medicare in 1965 and has for years supported a national health insurance system. He and Waxman teamed up to produce the 1990 Clean Air Act. Other accomplishments he [touts](#) are the Endangered Species Act and the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

But on climate legislation, Dingell would not have been a help. Obama has pledged to make addressing climate change a priority—a commitment he [reiterated](#) in a video address this week. And some Senate Democratic leaders, normally moderate checks on their wild-eyed House counterparts, appear [eager](#) to take on clean energy and fuel efficiency.

Dingell isn't opposed to all energy regulation. In his proposed fuel efficiency legislation in 2007, he supported "incentives" for auto manufacturers but opposed forcing them to adapt. He supports cap-and-trade, but [his version](#) is more industry-friendly than Waxman's, which would actually [put the Environmental Protection Agency in charge](#). The difference between Dingell and Waxman is best captured by the fear struck in the hearts of energy sector sympathizers: Dingell's plan would "dramatically raise energy prices," [according to the Competitive Enterprise Institute](#), while Waxman's "would send us back to the Stone Age."

Stylistically, Waxman is a better fit for an Obama-led Democratic charge. He's crazy, but unlike Dingell, he's happy-crazy. Dingell's craziness is darker. He was known for strong-headed, Lyndon Johnson-style political arm-twisting. He leaked dirt about his enemies and fed the news cycle to keep favorable coverage alive. He sometimes went overboard, as with his hearings alleging scientific fraud against Nobel Prize-winner David Baltimore, who was later exonerated, and AIDS researcher Robert Gallo, whose allegations were also dropped. Waxman is tough, too, but in a matter-of-fact, bury-you-with-evidence kind of way. He's a famed tightwad with a righteous streak, but he's not a drama queen. As head of the House oversight committee, he earned the moniker the "Mustache of Justice."

Waxman's rise has broader implications, too. He's just the latest combative Democrat to rise in the Obamaverse. Like incoming Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel, Waxman is a partisan. He also represents coastal creep in the legislative branch—the influence of the West and East over industrial Middle America. (Between Pelosi, Harry Reid, Barney Frank, and now Waxman, the power of pro-regulation liberals over hands-off Blue Dog Democrats is rising. And no, Chicago is not Middle America, although Obama's deference to coal could be a problem for the bicoastal mafia.) Lastly, Waxman's victory coincides with the [failure](#) (so far) of Detroit's Big Three to win a federal bailout. Dingell may have been the industry's last best hope to stave off profit-narrowing regulation. (His wife, Debbie Dingell, is an executive at General Motors.)

This doesn't mean Waxman can snap his fingers and make cars more efficient or carbon emissions more costly. As always, the question looms: Will he change the committee, or will the committee change him? He will have to twist arms and make compromises to win votes, and Dingell is not vanishing into the ether (he's now "chairman emeritus"). Meanwhile, congressional Republicans won't easily forget Waxman's grillings.

But signs suggest House Democrats are ready to be led; more than half of them voted for him. And unlike Dingell in the 1980s, Waxman will have the backing of an ambitious administration. So maybe it won't be just his fingers doing the snapping.

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