



Dingell Becomes Longest-Serving House Member, Michigan Democrat Has Been in Congress Since 1955, Under 11 Presidents

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Dwight Eisenhower was in the White House back when Rep. John Dingell, D-Mich., was sworn in for his first House term by Speaker Sam Rayburn -- under a flag adorned with 48 stars.

Today, more than 53 years since he took over the seat after the death of his father, Dingell becomes the longest-serving House member in the nation's history.

And if day 19,420 as a House member is like those that preceded it, it will be a long day at the office for "Big John."

"Same as any other day -- I'm going to work in the same office, I'm going to go to the [House] floor, do the same things in committee, and do the same things in terms of work," Dingell told ABCNews.com in an interview. "It's a great job. I love it, and I'm grateful every day to the good Lord for giving me another day."

At 82, despite being recently stripped of the House Energy and Commerce Committee chairmanship he first held in 1981, Dingell is still going strong. Under President Obama, Dingell is looking forward to seeing a bill that he has filed in Congress after Congress -- just like his father did before him -- signed into law: universal health coverage.

It's that tenacity -- and the fact that he's still coming to work every day, in crutches or a wheelchair, due to a recent knee replacement -- that friends and colleagues say mark his true legacy.

"He's tough, he's principled, and he's committed to the United States House of Representatives," said Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., who has served alongside Dingell on the Energy and Commerce Committee for 33 years. "And he can't walk away, because his father would never walk away. That still animates him -- his father's philosophy.

"He's a living link to the principles of fairness and protecting the public interest, that inspired the New Deal," Markey said.

Fred Malek, a longtime Republican who's known Dingell since 1973, said Dingell has shown his true "perseverance and dedication" by not giving up under difficult circumstances.

He never lost "a step when the Republican revolution in 1994 resulted in his losing his powerful position as Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee. This was apparent more recently when he again found his position changing," Malek said. "John Dingell's commitment to excellence and devotion to his country is an inspiration, and we could not have a better man to honor as the longest-serving member of Congress in our history."

Tuesday night, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi -- whose father also served alongside Dingell -- organized a reception in the Capitol to honor his achievement. Speakers included former President Bill Clinton.

"Every chapter of John Dingell's life has been lived in service to his country," Pelosi, D-Calif., said. "To work alongside John Dingell is to be inspired by the history of our institution and humbled by the seriousness of our work."

By the numbers, Dingell's service is staggering. As of Tuesday, according to the House historian's office, he had cast 24,377 roll-call votes. Between his father's service and his own, a Dingell has represented Michigan in Congress since Herbert Hoover was president

Dingell has won 28 general elections. He's served under 11 of the nation's 44 presidents - including Obama, who was born six years after Dingell entered the House. His service to the House of Representatives actually dates to 1938, when he first worked as a House page.

The second-longest-serving member of the House -- Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich. -- served on Dingell's staff before being elected to Congress in his own right.

If he continues getting re-elected, Dingell could become the longest-serving member of Congress -- including service in both the House and the Senate -- in January 2013.

The late Sen. Carl Hayden, D-Ariz., holds the record for combined service in Congress at nearly 57 years, and Sen. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., has the longest tenure of any current member of Congress, with a combined 56 years in the House and Senate.

Tough Legislator

Dingell has had a leading role in some of the biggest congressional achievements over the past few decades, including the Clean Air Act, children's health insurance and cable regulations. But he hasn't achieved longevity by being everyone's friend. His sometimes

imperious manner and tough bargaining tactics have rankled colleagues who have struggled to understand a powerful chairman's intentions.

He has frustrated Democratic and Republican House speakers alike -- including Pelosi, who has in the past supported Democratic challengers in Dingell's House races. Pelosi also offered quiet encouragement to a successful attempt to wrest his committee gavel from him last year.

Dingell has clashed frequently with the left in his party in recent years, most famously over his passionate defense of the automobile industry in his native Michigan. His wife since 1981, Debbie Dingell, is a longtime executive with General Motors.

Automaker Ally

Dingell's support for Detroit has led him to oppose tighter emissions standards for cars and trucks -- a position that emboldened Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., to launch his surprise bid to oust Dingell as chairman of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee after the November election.

Waxman's bid succeeded, in a secret ballot vote of the House Democratic caucus that shocked many observers of Congress. Dingell wound up accepting a new role as "chairman emeritus" of the committee -- notwithstanding the rebuke delivered by his colleagues.

"This was clearly a change year, and I congratulate my colleague Henry Waxman on his success today," Dingell said in accepting the vote's outcome.

The deal he worked out with Waxman and House leaders gives Dingell an expanded role on health care. He has filed his national health insurance bill -- every year, it gets the label H.R. 15, numbered to match his congressional district -- in Congress going back to 1943.

"He feels like he has a commitment to people of his district not to go away," said Steve Elmendorf, a veteran Democratic operative in Michigan and national politics. "It helps to have people around who know the institutional history, who know how things are done."

Dingell said he feels a special responsibility to work on health care and to address the financial crisis, given the fact that he's one of the few remaining members of Congress with firsthand memories of the Great Depression.

"History never repeats, but there's a lot you can learn from history if you watch it," he said. "I won't say this is a repetition of the Depression, but I've got to be honest with you, there are some very scary parallels. I hope that we learn the lessons that the Depression taught."

Those lessons, he said, include the importance of fast action on a stimulus -- unlike the attitude held by Hoover. And he wants to see universal health care -- both for "humanitarian" reasons, and to help his beloved auto industry.

"If we took care of health care, our automobile companies would be the most successful in the world," Dingell said.

While he was disappointed to lose his chairmanship, Dingell takes the long view.

"I was chairman [or ranking Democrat] for 28 years, but before that I was not chairman, and I got lots of things done," he said. "I don't see any reason why I can't do that again."