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GOP May Rebrand House Enviro Committees

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House committees as we know them may not be around much longer.

If Republicans win control of the House in November -- which many political handicappers see as likely -- environmental panels like the Natural Resources Committee, the Energy and Commerce Committee, and the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming might undergo some rebranding.

"Parties like to put their stamp on the committees for policy and ideological reasons," said Norman Ornstein, a congressional expert and resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. "You want the committee name to reflect what your priorities are." The Energy and Commerce and Natural Resources panels have already undergone a host of name changes in recent decades.

The word "energy" was dropped from Energy and Commerce's name in 1995, when the newly installed Republican leadership rebranded it the Commerce Committee, according to the House Historian's office.

"It was part of this reform movement, they wanted to change things up," recalled former Rep. Thomas Bliley Jr. (R-Va.), who was chairman of the panel from 1995 until 2001. The rebranding was the brainchild of then-House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.), Bliley said.

"I really wasn't consulted about it, they just went ahead and did it," he said. Bliley said leadership had attempted to strip some of the energy jurisdiction from the committee, "but we fought that pretty good."

House Republicans later changed the name back in 2001, when a new chairman from an energy-producing state, Billy Tauzin (R-La.), took charge of the committee. Observers say it is unlikely that Republicans will want to rename the panel this time around.

Unless Republicans decide to make sweeping changes in jurisdiction, "I doubt they'll change the name of the Energy and Commerce Committee," Ornstein said.

But the Natural Resources Committee may be a more natural target, Ornstein said.

"I can imagine maybe they'll change it back to Resources again," Ornstein said. "In this case it would probably reflect more of a focus in energy development and less on conservation."

Committee Chairman Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) reinstated the word "natural" to the committee name when Democrats won control of the chamber in 2006, according to the House Historian. Former committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska) had stripped the term from the committee name in 1995, calling it the Resources Committee.

"The name change will restore balance to the Committee and revitalize Congress' commitment to conserving our Nation's unique natural and cultural heritage -- including its natural environment, public lands and forests, fish and wildlife, and of course, its people," Rahall said in a 2007 statement.

Dan Kish, who served as the committee's GOP chief of staff from 1990 until 1997, said the decision to remove the word "natural" was primarily for simplicity's sake. "We've got a lot of westerners on the committee; they're not known for being long-winded. Take a word out, saves time," he said.

Former Chairman George Miller (D-Calif.) had first changed the name to the Natural Resources Committee in 1993. Prior to that, it was the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs for more than four decades.

Another GOP target could be the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming -- if it survives.

"Certainly if they kept the select committee, I don't think they would keep the title on energy independence and global warming," Ornstein said. Republicans may decide to change the name to the Select Committee on Energy Independence, he added. But most people who follow energy and environmental issues think GOP leadership would decide to scrap the panel established in 2007 by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) altogether.

Under the leadership of Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) -- a staunch advocate of efforts to curb greenhouse gases -- the panel has led probes into the climate and energy policies of former President George W. Bush's administration and held a slew of hearings investigating the effects of global warming. GOP leadership, meanwhile, has packed the panel with some of the chamber's most vocal global warming skeptics, including Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner (R-Wis.), the ranking member.