



In 50 years, change hasn't hindered Dingell in Congress

12/8/2005 10:09 PM

By Kathy Kiely, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — When Rep. John Dingell first arrived in Congress from Detroit, tailfins and V-8 engines were the rage among new car buyers. His hometown was the nation's fourth most populous city. And his Democrats were a year into a 40-year reign as majority party in the House.



How have Republicans taken over the House from the Democrats? "We gave it to them," says John Dingell.

By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

Today, skyrocketing gas prices are causing Detroit's muscle cars to fall out of favor. Detroit is the eighth-largest city. And Democrats face an uphill battle to reclaim the House majority they lost 11 years ago — along with the gavel Dingell used to wield as chairman of the powerful House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Still, the 79-year-old Michigan lawmaker remains a force to be reckoned with.

On Tuesday, Dingell will go to the White House to celebrate his 50th anniversary as a member of Congress. He'll be lunching with

President Bush, even though the pugnacious Democrat recently described the Bush administration as "incompetent." The fete shows how much influence Dingell continues to have, with Republicans as well as Democrats. "Even when we've disagreed, John has always been someone I respected," Vice President Cheney, a former House colleague, said recently.

John Dingell Jr. joined the House on Dec. 13, 1955, after winning a special election to replace his late father, who had been a House member since 1933.

Since the younger Dingell's arrival, 10 presidents have come and 10 have gone, the Berlin Wall was built and dismantled, Alaska and Hawaii entered the union, and the civil rights movement transformed the nation. When Dingell entered the House, there were three black members. Today, there are 42 .

Time hasn't softened Dingell's razor tongue, which he wields freely against himself and his own party. "I made some fine, dumb-ass blunders," he says, refusing to enumerate them. "I'm smart enough to admit I made the mistakes. I'm not dumb enough to tell you what they are."

He's not so coy when it comes to the Democratic Party's blunders. Asked why Republicans control the House today, Dingell declares: "We gave it to them. Bad candidates, bad behavior, bad policies, bad politics. We made mistakes. Hubris."

But Dingell also thinks his party is a victim of its own success. A fierce advocate of national health care and labor unions, Dingell says the voters who remember his party's struggles to improve wages, health and labor standards are mostly gone. "A lot of them have died," he says, but their children have "gotten affluent. Now they think they're Republicans."

As the top Democrat on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Dingell has helped craft legislation on matters ranging from natural gas prices to telecommunications to health care. The auto industry advocate has also battled against

USAToday.com – In 50 years, change hasn't hindered Dingell in Congress increasing fuel efficiency standards. But as an avid sportsman who lines his office walls with hunting trophies, Dingell also has been a champion of cleaning up water pollution and expanding wilderness areas.

Not everyone is impressed with his tenure. Paul Jacob of U.S. Term Limits, a group that succeeded in establishing term limits for Michigan's state legislators but not for Congress, said that Dingell's 50 years in office "is way too long for any one person to hold power."

Former representative Lynn Rivers, who was forced by redistricting to run against Dingell in a bitter primary three years ago, begs to differ with Dingell's assertion that he has remained friends with most of his political opponents. "I don't find myself in a position where I can be friends with him," Rivers says.

But if Dingell can be, in the words of House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer, "gruff and intimidating," he also inspires fierce loyalties, even among Republicans.

White House chief of staff Andy Card, whom Dingell once recommended for a job as president of the auto industry's trade group, is a fan. Cheney recently spoke at a party in Dingell's honor. The son of former Reagan administration aide Ken Duberstein, Andy, calls the congressman "Uncle John."

Though his Democratic Party has been out of power for more than decade, Dingell still has clout. His wife, Debbie, is vice chairwoman of the General Motors Foundation and a member of the Democratic National Committee. Many Dingell protégés have top-level jobs in government and industry. "This town is full of people who graduated from the John Dingell school," says former representative Vic Fazio, D-Calif.

If Dingell ever pines for the days when Democrats ran the House and Detroit dominated the auto industry, he doesn't let it show.

"I've tried a lot of times in my life to go back," Dingell says. "But that can't be."

Friends say that attitude is the secret to Dingell's longevity. "What's impressive about the guy is he's stayed flexible," Fazio says. "He's given up on some battles and moved on to others. John always stayed with the times."

Contributing: James R. Healey and Paul Overberg