

The ‘Babe Ruth’ of legislators

By: [David Nather](#)

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Congress is losing a lot of policy heavyweights this year, but there’s only one whose career spans from the creation of Medicare to the passage of the Affordable Care Act.

In his nearly six decades in Congress, John Dingell has played a central role in more issues than most ordinary lawmakers ever get to touch — everything from health care to energy, environmental laws, food safety and telecommunications policy, and an aggressive oversight approach that cut across even more issues that affect Americans daily.

He’s worked on just about every environmental law on the books, from the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act to the National Environmental Policy Act — the law that requires agencies to write environmental impact statements about their upcoming actions. He also played a crucial role in the Clean Air Act amendments of 1990, the biggest rewrite of that law.

[\(PHOTOS: Who’s leaving Congress?\)](#)

And Dingell is the Democrat who introduced a universal health care bill in every new session of Congress, keeping the cause alive until the passage of President Barack Obama’s signature legislative achievement in 2010. He rallied Democrats to keep going, urging them not to let another health care reform effort end in failure. And at the signing ceremony, it was Dingell who sat next to Obama, grinning broadly as his cause became the law of the land.

When Dingell announced his retirement Monday, his colleagues didn’t dwell on whether all of his legislative accomplishments will stand the test of time — especially with the ongoing fights over Obamacare. Instead, they mourned the loss of someone who had mastered both politics and policy as thoroughly as Dingell had.

Former Rep. Rick Boucher, a Virginia Democrat who served with Dingell for many years on the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said working on legislation with Dingell was “like playing baseball with Babe Ruth.”

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“He’s the most accomplished legislator that the House has seen in the latter half of the 20th century and the first part of the 21st century,” said Boucher, who now runs the

government strategies group at the Sidley Austin lobbying firm.

Dingell is a firm believer in the power of government, in the style of New Deal liberalism, and especially in the use of old-school congressional power. That's a trait he demonstrated as he expanded the reach of the House Energy and Commerce Committee during his days as chairman, to the point where he would point to a photo of Earth taken from space, hanging in the committee lounge, and tell his staff, "That's our jurisdiction."

He had plenty of clashes along the way, especially with environmentalists who thought he weakened too many laws to protect Detroit's auto industry — one of the conflicts that led to his ouster as chairman by Rep. Henry Waxman of California in 2009. And his oversight style sometimes struck critics as too heavy-handed — especially in the case of a [1980s investigation](#) into allegations of scientific fraud that damaged careers, including that of a scientist who was later exonerated.

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But his legislative skills, and his sheer virtuosity in the range of subjects he took on, won him the respect of his colleagues and even some of his opponents.

Rick Kessler, Dingell's former chief of staff, noted that "if you think about the Clean Air Act and NEPA, any member would be proud to accomplish one of these, let alone both. And those are just part of his career."

Even Republicans who share virtually none of his policy goals gave him credit for the scope of his work.

"He is certainly one of the top House members of all time and arguably the most successful who was never elected speaker," Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas), who clashed with Dingell when Barton was Energy and Commerce chairman and Dingell was the ranking member, said in a statement to POLITICO. "There isn't any aspect of American life in the 20th and 21st century that hasn't been touched by legislation John Dingell played a major role in. ... His list of accomplishments on the Energy and Commerce Committee will likely never be equaled."

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"We spar over policy, but the disagreements end when we leave the dais," said Barton, who called Dingell "a tough political opponent and also a close personal friend."

Former colleagues say Dingell worked hard to master the subjects, but also the procedural rules — because he knew that was a key to achieving the policy goals he wanted.

One of Dingell's most famous quotes is about the importance of knowing the rules: "If I let you write the substance and you let me write the procedure, I'll screw you every time."

That quote captures his aggressive style in dealing with other lawmakers, and the intimidating presence he could project.

But in reality, former lawmakers and staffers said, he made it a point to learn the substance in great detail, and to hire the most experienced staff members to carry out the legislative work. “He started with a deep base in knowledge,” Boucher said, and “in Washington, knowledge is power.”

Dingell certainly knew health care policy — and his career was bookended by the creation of two of the biggest health care programs ever passed by Congress.

He presided over the House vote when Medicare was created in 1965, and kept the gavel he used during the floor debate. So in March 2010, when the House was on the verge of the final vote on Obamacare and opponents were protesting loudly outside, Dingell gave an impassioned speech to the Democratic caucus urging them to pass the bill — and then handed the Medicare gavel to then-Speaker Nancy Pelosi, as a sign of the historic nature of the vote.

In his statement Monday, Obama nodded to Dingell’s role in fighting for that moment — declaring that “of all John’s accomplishments, perhaps the most remarkable has been his tireless fight to guarantee quality, affordable health care for every American.”

That doesn’t mean Dingell had the best relationship with all Democrats and their supporters, of course. One of the most painful ironies of Dingell’s career was the fact that the man who wrote so many of the best-known environmental laws had so many clashes with environmental groups.

He wrote the landmark Endangered Species Act and had a major hand in many other laws. “We have the bald eagle today because of John Dingell,” said Boucher. But his critics in environmental groups say he never went far enough in his clean-air policies and never got ahead of the curve on climate change.

Their explanation? The auto industry affected his views too much. Dan Becker of the Safe Climate Campaign put it this way: “I think his commitment to the environment stopped at the car door.”

Yes, Dingell was at the center of the 1990 rewrite of the Clean Air Act, negotiating between the George H.W. Bush administration on one side and Waxman and environmental groups on the other. But the environmental groups say the car pollution controls in his version of the bill could have been stronger. They also say he spent too many years [fighting against](#) stronger Corporate Average Fuel Economy standards.

But Dingell’s supporters say that view overlooks the tradeoffs he had to make as a representative of Detroit. They say he had to balance the need for stronger environmental regulations against the insistence of Detroit’s automakers that they had to protect people’s

jobs.

“You’re making sure that the companies that were employing the workers got what they needed to keep employing the workers, but also making sure that everyone else got what they needed for a clean environment,” said former Dingell staffer John Orlando, now a top lobbyist for CBS.

Even when Democrats have been in the minority, Dingell stayed involved. He had a big role in the passage of the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the major rewrite that passed when Rep. Thomas Bliley, Virginia Republican, was the committee chairman and Dingell was the ranking member.

That law created the E-Rate program, which subsidizes Internet connections for schools and libraries. Dingell has kept a close watch on the program, and suggested it should be halted in 1998 over allegations that the funds were being mismanaged. Industry lobbyists say his criticisms helped set the program on the right track.

Dingell was also one of the main authors of the Food Safety Modernization Act, the food regulation overhaul Obama signed in early 2011. In that law, too, outside groups say Dingell saw himself as a broker between groups with competing needs.

“Over the years, the main thing that he’s done has really been a broker between the industry and those of us who are advocates,” said Jaydee Hanson, senior policy analyst for the Center for Food Safety. “He’s not always done what we’ve wanted but ... at least when you disagreed with him you knew what you were talking about.”

Jenny Hopkinson, Maggie Severns and Andy Goodwin contributed to this report.

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