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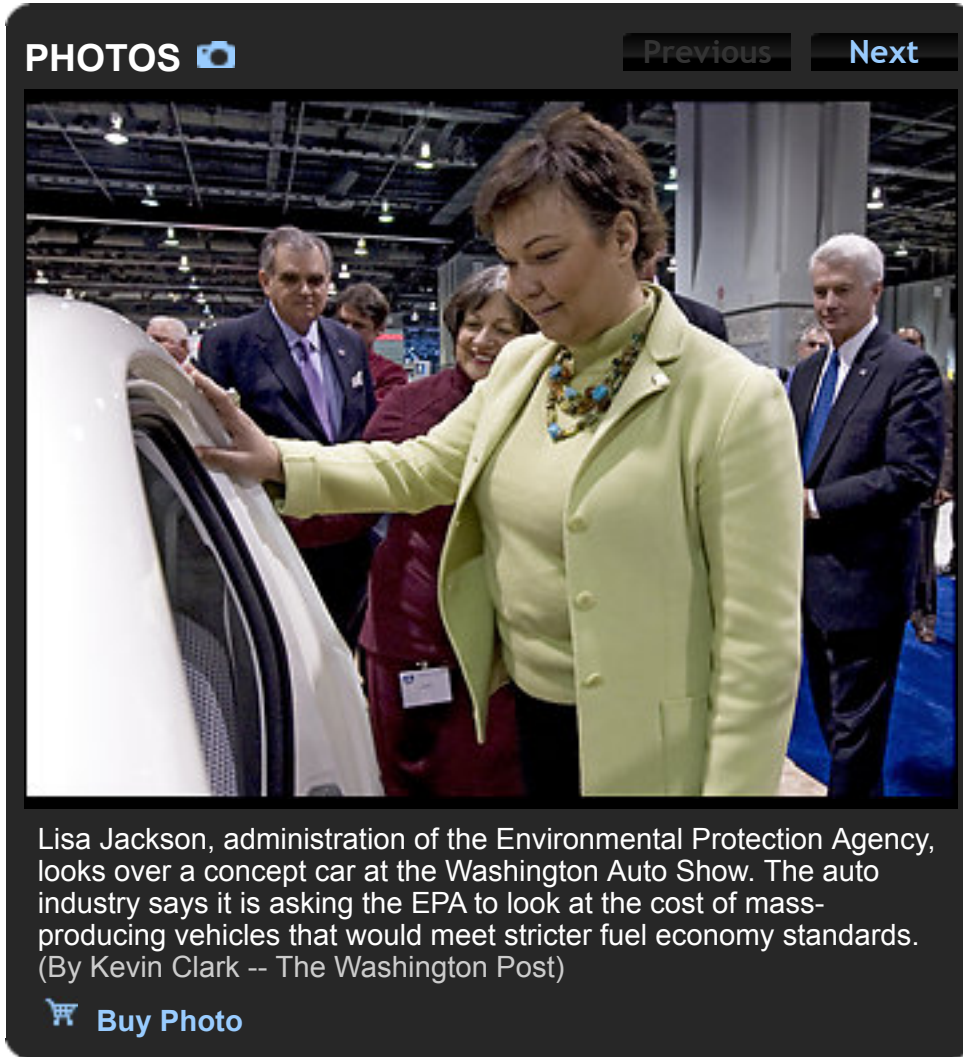
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## Its Clout Waning, the Auto Industry Is Losing Its Ability to Steer Policy

By Kimberly Kindy and Kendra Marr  
 Washington Post Staff Writers  
 Wednesday, February 4, 2009  
 Rep. John D. Dingell of Michigan walked onto a stage across from a "green car" exhibit last night at the Washington Auto Show and was honored as a "true champion of the automotive industry."



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The Detroit area Democrat was given a trophy with a crystal steering wheel, a gesture that signaled the end of an era -- one in which automakers ruled Congress, easily deflected pressure to build fuel-efficient cars and packed their trademark shows with super-size SUVs perched on fake mountaintops. The ousting of Dingell late last year from his chairmanship of the House Energy and Commerce Committee by Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Calif.) was a public step in what politicians and lobbyists say has been a gradual erosion of the auto industry's clout in Washington and in state legislatures. President Obama's move last week to support strict California vehicle emission standards was another blow to the industry, already reeling from financial pressures and dismal sales; the Big Three automakers yesterday said that January sales were down -- 55 percent at Chrysler, 49 percent at [General Motors](#) and 39 percent at Ford -- compared with a year ago. For decades, advocates such as Dingell protected the industry from demands for more

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fuel-efficient vehicles, while sophisticated and expensive lobbying and legal strategies -- some taxpayer-funded -- also helped the carmakers fight off challenges.

But that kind of rock-solid support in Congress has worn away, as many members say they have been repeatedly misled by the companies' promises of reform and complaints that new initiatives would spell financial ruin. It was a sentiment voiced last fall, when lawmakers considered whether they should provide as much as \$25 billion to prevent the industry's collapse.

Advertisement Even after accepting billions of dollars from the federal government, and as they gear up to plead for billions more, automakers are continuing to fight efforts by the Obama administration and congressional Democrats to bolster fuel-efficiency standards.

They responded to Obama's support of the California effort, which 13 other states are poised to follow, by sending more lobbyists into statehouses. They have spent an estimated \$10 million in legal fees to challenge efforts in California, Vermont, Rhode Island and New Mexico, according to Sierra Club lawyer David Bookbinder, who is fighting automakers' actions.

In Washington, the auto industry spent \$65 million last year to lobby Congress, ranking 16th among all industries, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Its efforts largely focused on developing a national fuel economy and emissions standard weaker than the one proposed by California.

Industry leaders continue to argue that Congress is trying to force them to build cars Americans don't want, at least as long as gas prices remain low.

In an interview, Waxman said, "I voted for money for the bailout because I want them to survive, but this makes me think that they have not yet stopped being controlled by their own self-interest." He added: "They are being shortsighted. This type of conduct has done a great deal of harm to America and the industry."

Until very recently, the relationship between automakers and policymakers went something like this: The industry asserted its position, and leaders in Washington largely acquiesced.

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