

House GOP mulls chief for energy panel

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Who will chair the House Energy and Commerce Committee?

That's one of the most important decisions the new Republican majority will make. The panel will be instrumental in GOP efforts to repeal or overhaul President Obama's signature health care legislation, rein in the Environmental Protection Agency and reassert the public's desire for increased domestic energy production.

Several of the committee's current Republicans either retired or were defeated in primaries, and four are running for chairmen. The top two contenders are former Chairman Joe Barton and Rep. Fred Upton. Two others have expressed interest in case term limits eliminate Barton.

Here is a brief look at the candidates.

Who: Rep. Joe Barton, R-Texas

Summary: The conservative congressman, whose district extends from the southern suburbs of Fort Worth toward Houston, became one of the better-known House members earlier this year, but not for the right reasons. After the Gulf of Mexico oil spill, he surprised former BP Chief Executive Officer Tony Hayward by apologizing to him for the Obama administration's intervention in the spill during a hearing before the committee.

Barton also ran unsuccessfully against Ohio Rep. John Boehner for minority leader in 2006. Boehner later kept Barton at arm's length over the BP episode, and Boehner's support is likely to be crucial in deciding who gets to head the committee.

While Barton's conservative credentials appear to be strong, he did support funding for embryonic stem-cell research, which upset some social conservatives.

Barton has historically opposed giving the Federal Communications Commission the power to regulate the Internet, and net neutrality is shaping up to be a big issue that might be confronted by Energy and Commerce.

Further, Barton's office appears to be fond of taking trips paid for by special interests. In June, a Barton staffer took a trip to Los Angeles courtesy of the National Cable and Telecommunications Association. Two Barton staffers went to Las Vegas courtesy of the National Association of Broadcasters. These same two staffers were also in Vegas courtesy of the Consumer Electronics Association.

Major endorsements: Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill., and Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., of the House Energy and Commerce Committee have both endorsed Barton, but both have put themselves forward as candidates in the event that he is considered ineligible.

Years of service: 26

American Conservative Union lifetime rating: 94 percent

Top contributing industries in 2010: Electric utilities (\$179,800), oil and gas (\$134,220), pharmaceuticals (\$108,750).

Revolving door: Barton has at least seven ex-staffers mixed up in some of the biggest lobbying firms in D.C. -- including such lobbying powerhouses as K&L Gates; Ryan, Phillips, Utrecht & MacKinnon; and the Alpine Group. Another former staffer works for the National Mining Association.

Who: Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich.

Summary: Upton represents Michigan's 6th District, which is based in Kalamazoo and extends along the Michigan-Indiana border. He's been aggressively campaigning to become committee chairman promising to actively go after Environmental Protection Agency overreach and other issues important to conservatives.

However, Upton's poor track record as a fiscal conservative is disconcerting to many conservatives, often bucking his party on issues that would reduce spending. For instance, in 2009 Upton was one of 20 Republicans that opposed an amendment to cut the EPA's funding to 2008 levels. He was also one of 34 GOPers last year who voted for the Omnibus Public Lands Management Act that removed millions of acres of federal lands from energy exploration and production.

More recently, Upton came under fire from conservatives for supporting a law that banned incandescent light bulbs in favor of supposedly eco-friendly compact fluorescent bulbs, which many consumers dislike.

Despite these criticisms, Upton is liked by the party leadership. "But to speaker-in-waiting John Boehner and his leadership team, Upton is a team player who may stray on many votes but can be counted on to throw roadblocks in front of President Obama's plans for health care and climate change," reported Examiner senior political columnist Tim Carney.

Upton's staffers have also taken trips paid for by General Motors and the Consumer Electronics Association in the last year.

Major endorsements: Conservative Rep. Sue Myrick, R-N.C., has backed Upton, in an attempt to tamp down opposition by social conservatives. Myrick has specifically praised his pro-life commitment. Veteran conservative journalist Fred Barnes of the Weekly Standard has also endorsed Upton, saying he's "not a RINO. He has the right agenda to be Energy & Commerce chairman."

Years of service: 24

American Conservative Union lifetime rating: 74 percent

Top contributing industries in 2010: Electric utilities (\$171,600), health professionals (\$88,652), pharmaceuticals (\$82,700)

Revolving door: Scott Aliferis, Upton's longtime legislative director, is now at K&L Gates -- one of the most influential lobbying firms in Washington. Such a close connection between energy issues and one of Washington's biggest lobbying firms bears watching. Another former staffer, Henry Plaster, is a lobbyist on telecommunications issues, which fall under Upton's committee's purview.

Who: Rep. John Shimkus, R-Ill.

Summary: Shimkus, the first successful Republican politician from Madison County, Ill., in 50 years, is a former schoolteacher and holds an MBA. He represents the same rural district in southern Illinois once held by now-Sen. Dick Durbin, D. Shimkus has a conservative record overall, but he is also a strong advocate of ethanol, biodiesel, coal gasification subsidies. One of his former staffers traveled with his wife to Europe on the American Soybean Association's dime in 2005.

In his legislative career, Shimkus has focused on public safety issues, including the original bill designating 911 as the universal emergency phone number and a bill to put defibrillators in schools.

This Congress, he has sponsored four resolutions to recognize, honor or congratulate someone, but no important laws.

On the same night that Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., stunned the nation by shouting "You lie!" at President Obama during an address to Congress, Shimkus walked out of the chamber. The Left has attacked Shimkus for citing the biblical story of Noah during a global warming hearing, but they have taken the incident out of context. Shimkus, an orthodox Lutheran, has said he believes the Earth is warming. He had cited the Genesis flood story as part of a back-and-forth with two ordained ministers who had been citing the Bible in their prepared testimony.

Major endorsements: None. (Shimkus officially supports Barton if he is eligible.)

Years of service: 14

ACU lifetime rating: 89 percent

Top contributing industries in 2010: Health professionals (\$146,700), pharmaceuticals (\$120,708), electric utilities (\$67,100)

Revolving door: Five former Shimkus staffers lobby for the pharmaceutical, biotech, medical device and trucking industries.

Who: Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla.

Summary: A former aerospace engineer and Air Force vet who made his fortune in the restaurants and small hotels, Stearns has impressive conservative bona fides. He was one of 39 House members to receive an "A" from the National Taxpayers Union, and Citizens Against Government Waste named him a "Taxpayer Hero" in 2010. Along with Barton, Stearns has joined the newly formed Tea Party Caucus.

Stearns is a member of the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Caucus, and he wrote a 2008 paper on developing coal-to-liquid technology that was published in the Stanford Law & Policy Review. Stearns has proposed legislation in the current Congress to help crisis pregnancy centers and guarantee that states honor other states' concealed-carry gun permits. He is wary of subsidies for corn ethanol and an avid opponent of draconian regulations on electronic cigarettes. His main legislative focus as a subcommittee chairman was on issues of data security and privacy.

If he gets the gavel, Stearns has promised to hold a series of hearings on Obamacare and to rein in the Environmental Protection Agency, two top conservative priorities. If the GOP leadership wants to keep restive Tea Partiers happy, this dark horse might be their best bet.

Major endorsements: None. (Stearns officially supports Barton unless he is ruled eligible.)

Years of service: 22

ACU lifetime rating: 94 percent

Top contributing industries in 2010: Entertainment (\$60,900), real estate (\$42,883), telecom (\$33,000)

Revolving door: Three former Stearns staffers went through the revolving door to become telecom lobbyists; two are now energy lobbyists.