

Business

Republicans Fight to Head Panel on Energy, Commerce

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Republican Representative Fred Upton had little trouble beating his Democratic challenger in the Nov. 2 election, winning by 55,000 votes. His tougher race has come in Washington, where he's fighting to head a committee with power over issues from health care to energy.

The midterm elections gave Republicans control of the House of Representatives and set up a contest between Upton of Michigan and Representative Joe Barton of Texas for the chairmanship of the Energy and Commerce Committee. The lawmakers made their cases today to the Republican Steering Committee, which nominates members for leadership posts.

The prize is a panel that will play a role in Republican efforts to repeal President Barack Obama's health-care overhaul, block his environmental and energy initiatives and assert authority over issues such as vehicle fuel-economy standards.

Each candidate has faced criticism among Republicans. Barton angered party

leaders in June, when he apologized to BP Plc during a hearing on its oil spill. Upton is opposed by Tea Party activists and radio commentator Rush Limbaugh, who cite his voting record on issues such as supporting “cash for clunkers” incentives for vehicle purchases and a phaseout of incandescent light bulbs.

Upton is “one of the least fiscally conservative Republicans in the House,” said Max Pappas, vice president for public policy for FreedomWorks, a Washington group that says it advocates lower taxes and less government and is aligned with the Tea Party movement. The group’s “Down With Upton” campaign online has attracted 27,000 supporters and generated 1,000 calls to the steering committee, he said.

‘New Reality’

“This is part of a new reality,” Pappas said. “People are tired of business as usual.”

Upton went into his meeting with the steering committee carrying articles of support from David Keene, chairman of the American Conservative Union, and other Republicans. Upton said he promised efforts to reduce spending, block regulations that cost jobs and repeal health care reform, either in whole or “brick by brick.”

“I’ll stack my credentials against anybody’s,” Upton told reporters afterwards.

Barton, holding the gavel he used in 2004-2006 as chairman of the panel, told reporters that he pledged to the steering committee to be a team player if selected.

“I asked to let me have this gavel for real and give me a chance to prove that the new conservative majority can deliver for America,” Barton said.

Barton’s Apology

Representative John Boehner of Ohio, the Republican leader who is line to be the next House speaker, disavowed Barton’s comments on June 17, when the Texas lawmaker apologized to BP Plc after its Gulf oil spill and described as “a \$20 billion shakedown” the fund for victims that the company created at Obama’s urging. Barton apologized for the apology later that day.

Representative John Shimkus, an Illinois Republican, has said he will seek the chairmanship if Barton isn’t granted a waiver from party limits on how long members can serve on a committee as chairman or senior member of the minority. Florida Representative Cliff Stearns is also seeking the post.

Supporters of Upton, grandson of a founder of Whirlpool Corp., say he has the support of most congressional conservatives.

The anti-Upton campaign is viewed as “a Texan for a Texan,” according to Representative Mike Rogers, a Michigan Republican who sits on the steering committee. That is a reference to Dick Armey of Texas, the co-chairman of FreedomWorks who served as majority leader when Republicans controlled the House.

Bitter Tenor

The tenor of the fight has only damaged Barton’s prospects, said Michael McKenna, a Republican lobbyist and president of MWR Strategies Inc. in Washington.

“All Joe Barton has done is disqualified himself,” McKenna said in an interview. “The only point left open is if he has disqualified Fred Upton as well.”

Upton has said he will work to rein in federal spending and combat clean-air regulations promoted by the Environmental Protection Agency under Obama, including proposed limits on carbon dioxide from power plants and factories. Before meeting the committee today, he said he would conduct a “very aggressive oversight operation” as chairman.

He wrote Energy Secretary Steven Chu last week, demanding an accounting of the jobs created by the \$32.7 billion the department received from the economic stimulus package.

More than \$23 billion of that money had not been spent as of Nov. 19 and some Republicans want to try to rescind some of the funds to reduce the federal deficit.

Energy Jurisdiction

While Upton and Barton have tangled over who will run the Energy and Commerce committee, they are also fighting a proposal by Representative Doc Hastings, a Washington Republican, to claim its energy jurisdiction for the Natural Resources Committee, which Hastings will run in the next Congress.

Dividing energy and environmental oversight between the resources and commerce committees would hurt efforts to block economically damaging regulations pushed by the EPA, according to Upton.

“The voters do not want to see inside-the-Beltway squabbles,” Upton wrote today in Roll Call, a newspaper circulated at the Capitol.

(Updates with comments from Upton in seventh paragraph.)

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