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## Engel garners GOP support

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WASHINGTON — With the public agitated over higher gasoline prices and home heating bills, liberal Democratic Rep. Eliot Engel suddenly has plenty of Republican company in his long campaign to develop alternative fuels and better conserve energy.

Engel, who represents parts of Rockland and Westchester counties, has joined conservative-leaning military hawks from the Reagan and first Bush administrations to promote a \$12 billion blueprint for weaning the country off Middle East oil. The plan calls for heavy use of alternative fuels such as ethanol, which Engel had resisted, and tax incentives for automakers to build more gas-electric hybrid cars and cars that can use a mixture of fuel.

Engel's traditional allies — environmental groups and labor unions — are also part of the strange-bedfellows coalition called Set America Free. But it was the conservatives who formed the group to lobby Congress after concluding that dependence on foreign oil is a bigger threat to America's national security than previously thought.

In the past, these Republicans were more likely to push for increased U.S. oil production instead of developing new energy technologies. But the new coalition isn't addressing issues that have stymied other energy legislation, such as drilling in an Alaska refuge or requiring stricter fuel-efficiency standards for conventional cars.

"I didn't disagree with a word he said," Engel recalled thinking after listening earlier this year to Set America Free founder Frank Gaffney, former assistant secretary of defense under President Reagan and now president of the right-leaning Center for Security Policy.

"I have been looking for people who will put together a package of alternatives the way I see it," said Engel, who sits on the House Energy and Commerce Committee. "I don't care what their ideologies are. I take them at their word that they are worried about America being beholden to these unstable sheikdoms that could be toppled over or try to blackmail us."

The United States imports about 60 percent of its oil, with about one-half of imports coming from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, which is dominated by Middle East nations. About one-third

### Energy independence bill

Provisions in the energy independence bill sponsored by Reps. Eliot Engel and Jack Kingston

- Require all gas to contain 10 percent ethanol by 2015.
- Lift the tax on ethanol imported from Brazil to make it more widely available in the United States.
- Provide tax incentives to auto manufacturers to build and consumers to purchase alternative-energy cars.
- Provide other tax incentives to corporate and taxi fleets to switch to hybrids and other kinds of more fuel-efficient cars.
- Require fuel-efficiency labeling of tires to help consumers choose the most efficient models.
- Provide tax incentives to gas stations to install required pumps for alternative fuels.

of imports come from Middle East OPEC countries. Engel and other lawmakers project U.S. imports will grow to 70 percent in the next decade.

Set America Free wants at least a 50 percent reduction in U.S. oil imports by 2025.

The alliance has forced Engel to modify his own thinking about energy policies.

Engel said he no longer steadfastly opposes a government mandate and subsidies for corn-based ethanol, which he once said were "nothing more than a welfare program for farmers." He has been among lawmakers from the Northeast and California who have argued that ethanol would boost gas prices in their states, where the fuel is not widely produced.

"Everything needs to be on the table," Engel said in an interview last week. "I'd be willing to consider (wider ethanol use) if it were part of a real plan to change our energy policies."

Recent polling shows the public is clearly worried about the uncertainties of Middle East oil supplies and wants the federal government to act.

A June survey commissioned by the nonpartisan Civil Society Institute in Boston found that four out of five adults say the federal government is not doing enough about high energy prices and America's over-reliance on Middle Eastern oil. The same percentage also wants U.S. automakers to follow Toyota's strategy of working toward building only hybrid cars.

Meanwhile, New Yorkers are looking for relief from rising heating-oil and natural-gas prices. Government forecasts show the cost of heating oil, used by 2.4 million New York households, will increase by 27 percent in the winter and natural-gas prices will rise by 41 percent. The average New Yorker will pay \$466 more in the winter for heating, according to figures from the office of Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

Karen Grexa of Cortlandt said she and her husband would pay about \$900 more for heating oil in the winter.

"You figure between the price of gasoline and heating oil, that's a lot of money," she said. "It's hard for senior citizens and it is hard for young families with children. People on fixed incomes will have to cut out something to pay additional heating costs."

Engel, the only member of Congress in the Set America Free coalition, has joined Rep. Jim Saxton, R-N.J., to form the Oil and National Security Caucus, a bipartisan House group that is helping Set America Free build support for its agenda. So far, the group includes 10 Democrats and seven Republicans.

Last week, Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., vice chairman of the Republican Leadership Conference, recruited Engel as the lead Democratic co-sponsor of his "energy independence" bill, which picks up elements of the Set America Free plan.

The bill aims to reduce U.S. oil imports by 10 percent by 2015 and 20 percent by 2025.

"We think it is a useful image to have a liberal Democrat from New York and a conservative Republican from agriculture country in Georgia as co-sponsors," said Bill Johnson, Kingston's senior staff member. "If they can agree on something, that's a good model."

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