



ABOVE: First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt meets with a project superintendent in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1936 to discuss a Works Progress Administration project to convert a city dump into a waterfront park. BELOW: Two women take part in a Democratic Party campaign to re-elect President Franklin Roosevelt, showing how his programs had improved their lives.

THE PEOPLE'S PARTY

From Social Security and Civil Rights to today's social and economic issues, Democrats have shown themselves to be champions of American values.

by **MORRIS ARVOY**

As Democrats, we have a lot of reasons to be proud," says Michigan Congressman Dan Kildee.

Indeed, from Social Security and the GI Bill to the labor movement and equal rights for all, the sweeping reforms and social advances spearheaded by the world's oldest active political party have vastly enriched the lives of generations of Americans.

"Our party has always led the fight to protect and expand rights for hardworking Americans," notes Kildee, who represents Michigan's 5th Congressional District. "We are the party that passed Social Security, Medicare and health care reform, and that has stood up for voting rights, collective bargaining rights, women's rights and LGBT rights."



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE FDR PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY & MUSEUM

EQUALITY FOR ALL

For many, the Civil Rights Era of 1954 to 1968 is the epitome of Democratic achievement. The tumultuous struggle for African-American equality and the legislation that resulted paved the way for further equal rights victories for women, LGBT communities, farm workers, the disabled and many others – progress that Democrats are fighting for to this day.

The Civil Rights Movement was led by Democrats and activists of all colors, creeds and cultures, united in the goal of bringing equality to a people disenfranchised from the American system since the advent of slavery. The movement was led by everyday icons, statesmen, entertainers and visionaries including the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy, Mahalia Jackson, Julian Bond, Robert F. Kennedy, Harry Belafonte and current Georgia Congressman John Lewis, among others.

Unique among American social crusades to that point, the Civil Rights Movement represented a shift away from politics for the collective good and toward greater individual rights, according to acclaimed author and political columnist Jules Witcover.

“The civil rights revolution seems to me the most striking and influential political movement of the whole time since the end of World War II,” says Witcover, author of *Party of the People: A History of the Democrats*. “And the whole Great Society program was obviously an effort by President Lyndon Johnson to meet the needs of millions of Americans that weren’t being met.”

The civil rights legislation outlawing discrimination based on race, gender, religion and nationality announced by President John F. Kennedy in the spring of 1963 was stalled by reluctant Southerners in Congress. Sadly, it took Kennedy’s assassination that November, coupled with the legendary political prowess of Johnson, to motivate lawmakers to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

“No memorial oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy’s memory than the earliest possible passage of the Civil Rights Bill for which he fought so long,” Johnson cajoled his colleagues during his first address to a joint session of Congress on Nov. 27, 1963, less than a week after Kennedy’s death.

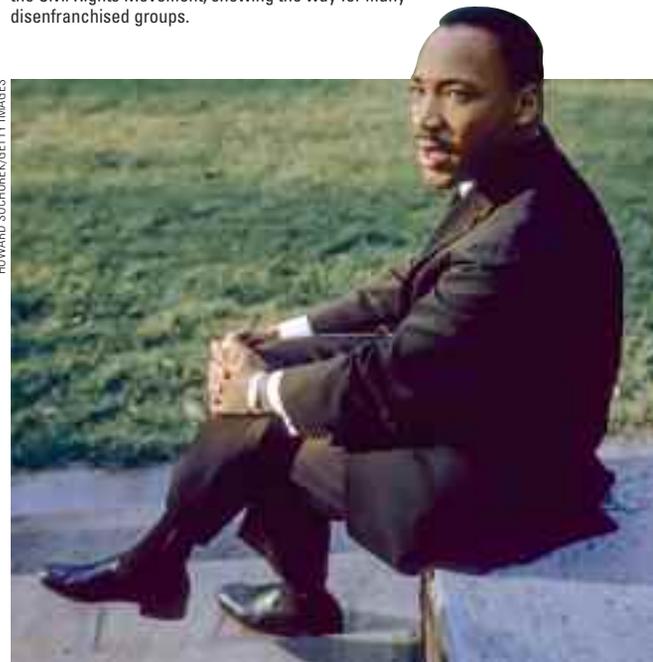
What some might consider companion legislation to the Civil Rights Act came more than a quarter century later with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Iowa Senator Tom Harkin authored and sponsored the bill. He even became the first person to deliver a speech on the Senate floor in American Sign Language, prior to the bill being signed into law.

The ADA ensured that no one could be discriminated against, regardless of their disability, for employment.



ARTHUR SCHATZ/GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: Today’s farm workers enjoy gains rooted in the efforts of Cesar Chavez and others, who began to organize in California in the 1950s and ‘60s. BELOW: The advocacy of Martin Luther King Jr. inspired Americans from all walks of life to join the Civil Rights Movement, showing the way for many disenfranchised groups.



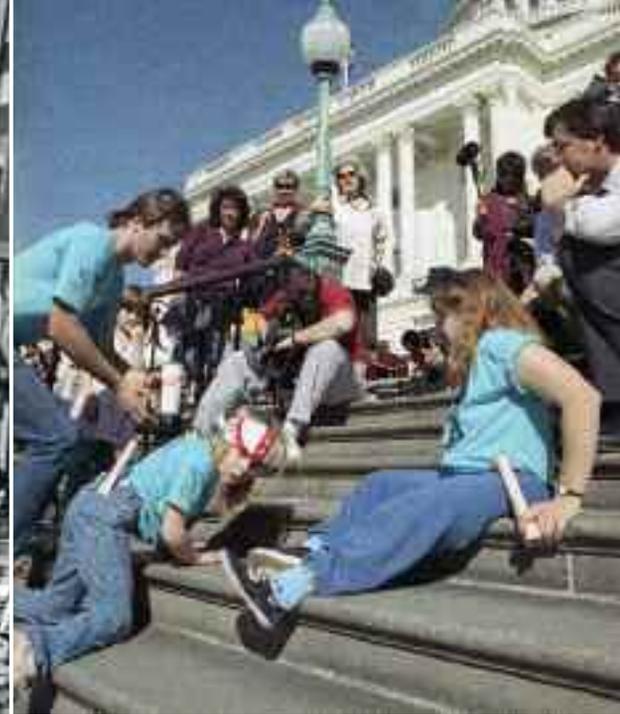
HOWARD SOCHUREK/GETTY IMAGES

It mandated that buildings and facilities be accessible to all. It even brought closed captioning for television.

“To me, it represents one of the two or three major things that I have ever done in my entire lifetime,” Harkin would say almost a decade later, in an interview for the Disability Rights Leadership Series, a project of the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund.

A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT

Bold policies that better all Americans are not new ideas for Democrats. The first Women’s Rights Convention was held in 1848, launching a 72-year campaign to the 19th Amendment and a woman’s right to vote. Of course, women’s equality remains a major cause.



LEFT: President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill, to provide educational and housing benefits to American veterans, during a June 22, 1944, ceremony at the Veterans Affairs Department in Washington, D.C. RIGHT: In a March 1990 event that came to be known as the "Capitol Crawl," a group of disabled citizens and their advocates take to the steps of the U.S. Capitol to draw support for the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Nearly 60 years ago, while still the junior senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy advocated for amendments to U.S. immigration and naturalization laws in order to ban discrimination based on national origin, recognizing that Mexican immigrants were being treated as poorly as the Irish had been a hundred years prior. Today, Democrats continue to lead the charge for a more welcoming variety of immigration reform, whether through a federal DREAM (Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors) Act or other progressive legislation.

Democratic achievement in other areas include the sustained support of working Americans immediately following World War II. "Simply put," says Glen Perusek, former director of strategic research for the national AFL-CIO, "the Democrats were the bearers of a set of policies that helped to create the stable working class of the mid- to late-20th century. The Party saw support for workers organizing as a fundamental right."

If supporting organized labor was a smart move that resulted in vastly improved working conditions and a robust economy, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act was pure genius. We know it as the GI Bill, which made it possible for an entire generation of working-class Americans to attend college, leading to the post-war housing boom.

"If you explain the fundamentals of the GI Bill – universal service and a set of strong educational and housing benefits – even to conservatives, they are hard-pressed to voice opposition," Perusek notes. "The long, steady expansion of the world economy from 1945 to 1973 was predicated on such policies."

And then there is the incredible story of California Congressman Mike Honda, who also is symbolic of

America's growth after World War II, despite being born into the nation's ignorance. As an infant, Honda and his family were sent to a Japanese-American internment camp. He returned to his native California around the time he was 12 years old, and his life has hit just about every Democratic touchstone since.

At 24, he served in the Peace Corps. By age 30, Honda was a public school teacher. He was first elected to Congress in 2000, soon becoming vice chair of the Democratic National Committee, and now represents the country's first Asian-American-majority district. Last year, he proudly tweeted a photo of himself with his transgender granddaughter.

ORIGINS

The origin of the Democratic Party came long before the Great Society, the Civil Rights Movement, the GI Bill or LGBT advocacy. In fact, we have Founding Father Thomas Jefferson to thank, Witcover notes. Frequently railing against the development of political parties – or "factions," as they were called – Jefferson and James Madison broke away from the Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton and John Adams, in an effort to disrupt their single-party stranglehold on American politics.

As movements will, Jefferson's attracted followers whom he initially called Republicans, then Democratic-Republicans, because they favored a weak federal government and championed states' rights and strict adherence to the Constitution. The Democrats adopted their current name when their standard bearer, Andrew Jackson was elected president in 1828.

A HOPE OF MANY YEARS

There is little dispute that the founder of the modern

Democratic Party was the 32nd president of the United States and the man widely considered to be our greatest president: Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

With the country reeling from the Great Depression – the worst economic disaster in our history – Roosevelt devised to bolster struggling Americans through a series of revolutionary economic and social reforms (sound familiar?) called the New Deal. In addition to creating programs that put millions of unemployed Americans to work and laid the foundation for the country’s modern infrastructure, in 1935 Roosevelt and the Democrats produced what has been called the single greatest government policy of all time: Social Security.

“Social Security today remains the anchor of our society,” says Witcover, who is in his seventh decade covering Washington politics. “There are many people who wouldn’t be making it now if it weren’t for Social Security. The efforts by the Republicans to privatize it have proved to be disastrous because Social Security remains for Americans an anchor in their lives.”

Providing economic security for those the economy has forgotten, Social Security is, in the words Roosevelt, “a hope of many years.”

“True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence,” Roosevelt said at the time. “People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”

And he should know; FDR and the Democrats were leaders of the coalition that defeated fascism and authoritarianism in World War II.

While Republicans are sometimes credited with being the tougher party in war, Perusek notes that FDR and the Democrats formed the partnership between America, Britain and the Soviet Union that defeated the scourge of fascism – at a terrible but necessary price.

“One can only speculate how the titanic struggles of the 1940s would have turned out if not for the foresight of Democratic leaders and the sacrifices of American citizen soldiers,” Perusek muses.

MORE WORK TO DO

With an energized base swelling with new generations of voters, the future for Democrats is limitless.

“I feel that the very essence of the Democratic Party is that we have the hope of the people,” says Albion College student Emily McCaleb of Michigan, one of millions of young people invigorated by the current presidential campaign. “Democrats have the passion. We never give up the idea that we can change the world and improve the human condition by bringing equality and compassion and opportunity to all.”

JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP IMAGES



A third generation Japanese American, Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) is an American success story. His family was sent to an internment camp when he was an infant, yet he rose to become a Democratic Party leader as vice chair of the Democratic National Committee from 2005 to 2013.

AP IMAGES



No family has been more central in the fight for justice and equality in America than the Kennedys, whose personal stories of triumph and tragedy mirror that cause. In 1963, U.S. Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy (left), Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (center) and President John F. Kennedy stood united in their support for the Civil Rights Act.

Congressman Kildee, whose district has been the subject of ongoing national news because of its lead-tainted water, acknowledges that while Democrats have accomplished much in their storied history, much work remains.

“Democrats also understand the important work yet to be done, like investing in our places and people, and protecting our environment to ensure that every American has access to clean drinking water – including families in my hometown of Flint, Michigan.

“We have made progress,” Kildee insists, his eyes toward the future, “but there is still more work to do to pass important reforms that make our country a more equal and just place.” ★

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