

## THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY

December 11, 1816 would have been an ordinary day in pioneer America if it were not for the efforts of Democrats, known then as Democratic-Republicans, across the United States. Instead, it went into the history books as the birth date of Indiana and the formal beginning of what would one day become the Indiana Democratic Party (IDP). In the early days of the Hoosier state, political parties were of little importance to the Indiana politicians that often worked late into the night and on most holidays to ensure the prosperity of the young state. A solid majority of these men were Democratic-Republicans from across the state that were dedicated to keeping Indiana slave free and economically healthy. Of all these men, however, few are as responsible for the early successes of Indiana as Jonathan Jennings, the state's first governor.

Before Indiana became the nineteenth state, it was an oversized territory represented in Congress by Jennings. With time, the region was divided into the states that now make up the Midwest. The process toward Indiana's membership in the Union continued on April 11, 1816 when the U.S. Congress passed a statehood Enabling Act that Jennings had presented. Next, a convention was created to arrange the potential state's government and pen its constitution. Jennings was the obvious choice as president of the convention that sought to compose the democratic standards that the territorial legislature had embodied for over a decade. Eventually, the document was completed and Indiana became the nineteenth state.

The first step as a state was to elect a legislative body and an executive governor. Once again, Jonathan Jennings was a clear choice as he easily defeated territorial governor Thomas Posey. At his inauguration, Jennings made his passion for Indiana very clear when he declared to the General Assembly, "The period has arrived, which has developed on you, the important

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

duty of giving the first impulse to the government of the state.” In the following six years of Jennings’ term as governor, he worked tirelessly to develop a sound legal system, create a stable state bank, and establish a school system that extended to secondary education. He also strived for the creation of a state library to preserve the history of the young state. While his successes were limited by the state’s undeveloped finances, Jonathan Jennings served as a brilliant leader and as the foundation of what would one day become the Indiana Democratic Party.

As the state grew stronger, the Democratic-Republicans continued their reign atop Indiana politics. After Jennings resigned from his governorship to return to his seat as a representative in the House, Ratliff Boon became the second governor from the same party. Like Jennings, Boon was a proponent of a slave free Indiana, but accomplished very little in his eighty-four days as governor. After Boon’s short term, Congressman William Hendricks was elected to Indiana’s highest office after running unopposed and receiving 18,340 votes. Former governor Jonathan Jennings then won Hendricks’ seat in Congress as the pair switched roles.

Hendricks served only a partial term as Indiana’s governor, but boasted significant accomplishments through a policy strictly dedicated to progressing Indiana. While the state’s reputation of being “The Crossroads of America” wasn’t adopted until over a hundred years later, William Hendricks is largely responsible for the motto that defines Indiana. He adopted a stringent agenda of creating the young state’s transportation infrastructure of roads and canals to help stimulate the sluggish economy that continued to feel the effects of the panic of 1819. As more transportation options were created, farms became connected to more populated areas and agriculture became a staple of the Indiana economy.

Being only the third governor, Hendricks inherited the antiquated territorial statutes along with the new state laws that frequently contradicted one another. In 1822, the state legislature

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

offered the governor power to revise these criminal and probate codes in an effort to erase the ambiguities. Hendricks of course accepted, without reparation, and created a more consistent legal system for Hoosiers to live by. His corrections were widely praised and guaranteed him a second election, but Hendricks resigned after being selected to serve in the U.S. Senate by the state legislature.

While Hendricks's efforts to create a statewide transportation system and reform state laws were pivotal in the development of Indiana, he is greatest known, especially by his ungrateful southern constituents, as the signer of legislation to move the capital from small Corydon to the budding metropolitan of Indianapolis. Time has proven the decision to be a prudent choice in a long list of William Hendricks's achievements for Indiana.

While Governor Hendricks avoided party politics throughout each of his political ranks, it was during his term that the first forms of partisan division became prevalent in Indiana. Democratic-Republicans from across the state declared their support for Andrew Jackson, John Quincy Adams, or Henry Clay in the upcoming presidential election. The debate between each of the candidates was very intense and led to an expansion of political discourse through the area. Advocates for each candidate were so impassioned that in 1824, the first state political convention was held when Elihu Stout requested that the Friends of Jackson that had been holding county meetings convene in Salem to promote their candidate. To Stout's disappointment, only seventeen delegates attended the gathering to represent thirteen of the fifty-one counties. Regardless of the lackluster presence, the convention serves as what many consider to be the origin of the IDP's annual meetings.

Ten years later, sides had officially been drawn in the General Assembly as Democrats and Whigs bantered back and forth about nearly every issue. During this time, the Whigs held a

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

strong majority in each extension of the legislative body, but Democrats fought with passion and wisdom to guarantee that the minority was represented, especially in the turbulent process of selecting the Representatives and Senators that embodied the visions of Hoosiers in Washington D.C. These frequently chaotic debates were so driven by the passion of Democrats, that fifty legislators from the Whig Party transferred to the Democratic Party by 1852.

It was in these early days that the Democratic emblem in Indiana was conceived by a series of political banter. Joseph Chapman, a well respected and extremely passionate Democrat that represented Hancock County in the state legislature, became vocally critical of a large number of his colleagues declaring themselves for William Henry Harrison in 1840. His dissatisfaction was echoed in Indianapolis and the Democratic postmaster wrote a letter encouraging Chapman to “crow” in opposition. In an odd series of events, a Whig stole the letter and published it statewide with additional commentary comparing Chapman to a rooster crowing with exultation. Rather than allowing the elementary level insult to embarrass the experienced congressman, he and Democrats across the state embraced the comments as compliments to their fiery passion portrayed in the State House. Soon after, newspapers began headlining about Democrats “crowing” their way to successes across the Indiana political spectrum and in due time, the rooster became the symbol of Indiana Democrats.

The first officially recorded meeting of the IDP came in 1848 when the Indianapolis newspapers reported the meeting of the Indiana State Central Committee of the Democratic Party. There is no chairman named of the seven men whom convened in the capital during what would become an illustrious two decades for Democrats in Indiana. Beginning in 1843, five straight Democrats, beginning with James Whitcomb, held the executive power of Indiana until 1861. Although the Democrats did not control the governor’s office during the U.S. Civil War

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

from 1861 to 1865, they held a strong majority in each legislative body and guided Indiana through the perils of war and the misguided smear tactics of Republican Governor Oliver Morton.

Thomas Hendricks, the nephew of Indiana's third governor William Hendricks, became the first Democrat governor to be elected in a northern state after the Civil War. With the experience of already serving in the U.S. House and Senate, Hendricks was prepared to deal with the postwar slump of September 1873 that sent the economy into a tailspin and unemployment rates higher than ever before. He avoided the corruption typically associated with Hoosier politicians at the time and reached across the aisle to maintain fiscal responsibility until the statewide economy rebounded. His bipartisan leadership during the crisis made Hendricks not only popular to Hoosier constituents, but to Democrats nationwide. Eventually he was elected vice president to Grover Cleveland in 1884 and skillfully represented Hoosiers with a zealous commitment to economic conservatism and strict obedience to the Constitution.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the voter demographics that Indiana is accustomed to today began to take their shape. Indianapolis continued to grow into a major urban city and was frequently represented by Democrats in the General Assembly. From 1895 to 1901, Thomas Taggart served as the mayor of Indianapolis before being elected as chairman of the Democratic National Committee, the principal organization governing the Democratic Party. As only the eleventh chairman, Taggart was the first from Indiana. Taggart never forgot his roots and was very influential in getting Thomas Riley Marshall elected as Woodrow Wilson's vice president in 1913.

Marshall had been elected governor in 1909 because of his fundamentally centrist position on most issues. In his single term, he pushed child labor law and anti-corruption

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

legislation through the General Assembly, but struggled to advance much of his progressive agenda before being nominated for the vice presidency at 1912 national convention. He and Wilson easily defeated incumbent President William Howard Taft and former President Theodore Roosevelt with 435 electoral votes. While Marshall and President Wilson were knowingly callous toward one another, they served as a strong team of leadership when the United States entered World War I in 1917. Marshall spent much of the rest of term touring the country encouraging citizens to purchase war bonds and to support the war effort.

Unfortunately, President Wilson suffered a severe stroke in 1919 and became incapacitated. By today's standards, Marshall would have become the first Acting President, but the rules at the time were unclear as Marshall practiced humility while performing all of Wilson's ceremonial duties.

Although the Civil War had long finished, racial tensions were high across the state and slowly crept into the Indiana General Assembly. During the 74<sup>th</sup> Assembly, Grand Dragon D.C. Stephenson, a Republican representative, claimed "I am the law in Indiana." In 1925, however, he was sentenced to lifetime imprisonment and began revealing the workings of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. He told stories of corruption, bribery, threats and hateful violence performed by his former colleagues in the General Assembly. Naturally, African-American and Caucasian Hoosiers, alike, were outraged by the deception and began to change the way they voted at the ballot box. Twelve years before the black vote nationally switched to the Democratic Party, African-Americans across Indiana started voting for Democrats in response to the Republican Party's connection with the Ku Klux Klan.

A decade after Thomas Riley Marshall concluded his term, the Great Depression struck America and once again Indiana's local agriculture economy floundered. After almost two years

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

of impoverished conditions nationwide, Franklin D. Roosevelt and his New Deal were elected to the presidency. In the same election, Paul McNutt was elected governor of Indiana. Both executives stretched their power further than ever before to help spur the economy. In Indiana, McNutt created a gross income tax that helped in the relief efforts of the unemployed. Despite gaping amounts of job loss, the policy turned a \$3.4 million deficit into a \$17 million surplus. As the governor, McNutt's popularity was extensive and would have guaranteed him a nomination for the presidency in 1940, but Roosevelt ran for an unprecedented third term and ended the chances of McNutt becoming the first Democratic president from Indiana. Regardless, Paul McNutt is revered as one of Indiana's greatest political machines for all of his statewide and federal efforts to reverse the effects of the Great Depression.

Like many of the Democrats that have represented Indiana in the national spotlight, Sherman Minton began his political career in the legislative body. He successfully piggybacked the successes of Governor McNutt and President Roosevelt to his seat in the U.S. Senate in 1834 after practicing law in New Albany for most of his life. During his time in Washington, Minton became a personal friend of Roosevelt's and shared his New Deal strategy to help return America to economic comfort. After his only term as a senator, Minton was appointed by Roosevelt to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals. The Indiana University graduate served the Court for nearly a decade before President Harry Truman, a counterpart of Minton's in the Senate, appointed him to the U.S. Supreme Court. In his seven years on the Court, Minton returned the judicial branch to its usual splendor by acting as a soothing presence compared to the frequently personal quarrels between other associate justices.

World War II shifted Indiana's job force from agriculture and commercial manufacturing to war production. Typically, women rushed to factories across the state to assemble tanks and

## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

other military products as men went off to each of the military branches. The extensive devotion shown by citizens across Indiana gave the state a quality war production record that President Harry S. Truman truly appreciated when he told Hoosiers in 1948, “You were efficient, you were helpful, you made one of the great contributions toward winning the war.”

One of the men hurrying to defend his country in World War II was Marion County’s Frank McKinney. Upon returning from the war, he became involved in politics and served as a delegate for Indiana at the 1948 national convention. Impressed by his war record and leadership abilities, delegates elected McKinney to be the chairman of the Democratic National Committee in 1951. He became the second chairman of the DNC from Indiana and kept the Hoosier state involved in the national political spectrum.

Merely three years after McKinney’s term had ended, the highest position in the Democratic Party returned to Indiana. Paul Butler, an attorney from South Bend, was a loyal committeeman for the Indiana State Central Committee for the Democratic Party for four years before advancing to the Democratic National Committee. Two years later, he was elected to lead the DNC and altered the role of chairmen forever. Instead of simply touring the country in an effort to raise donations, Butler began shaping the policy of Democrats at all levels. He was fervently committed to increasing civil rights protections as racial turmoil began to once again divide the country. This strong ambition led Paul Butler to be known as the Father of the modern Democratic National Committee.

The IDP continued to place Democratic leaders in the national spotlight for the next five decades. Most recently, Joseph Andrew, whom served as the chairman of the IDP from 1995 to 1999, became the latest chairman from Indiana to serve as the chairman of the DNC. Selected by President Bill Clinton, Andrew raised nearly a quarter of a billion dollars for the party and



## **THE HISTORY OF THE INDIANA DEMOCRATIC PARTY**

created the most diverse staff in the party's long history. Additionally, by becoming the fourth chairman from the Hoosier state, Andrew placed Indiana third on the list of state's with the most chairs behind only Massachusetts and New York.

While Indiana today is largely recognized as a red state, the IDP is responsible for a large amount of the state's general history. If it were not for early legislators such as Jonathan Jennings and William Hendricks, the state would not offer the amenities and charisma that it does today. The passion of those early Democrats has never ceased and continues today at all levels of the Indiana Democratic Party.