

# Democrats

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throw the civil rights agenda, they'll do it. And that is essentially what they've been trying to do. So, no, they don't love Black people. It's just that they love winning."

The danger is that the party shifts with political winds, Walters explains.

In 1984, after Jackson's first presidential run and second term Republican President Ronald Reagan defeated Democratic nominee former Vice President Walter Mondale, there were a series of meetings among the Democratic Party leadership, Walters recalls.

"One of those meetings was very hot because some of the younger leaders of the party were arguing that they had to reconfigure the role of the Civil Rights Movement in the party's profile, in the party's image. In other words, the Democratic Party was getting to be too Black. ...It meant that they had to be less aggressive in their support of civil rights issues, and they began systematically to do that," said Walters.

So, despite President Clinton's reputation for an affinity toward Black people, he was head of the Southern Governor's Association, which was opposed to affirmative action, says Walters.

"And that's where the leadership of the party came from for eight years. And so, the only reason they didn't do away with affirmative action was because of the protests on the part of Blacks. Otherwise, they tried to tinker with that civil rights legacy every way that they knew how."

As Democratic presidential contenders fight to succeed George W. Bush, could the party return to politics as usual? Democratic Party leaders bristle at the question.

"We've got to stop this stuff in the community saying the Democrats are taking everybody for granted," said Democratic National Committee Chairman Howard Dean.

"There's been more done in six months [by Congress] for the African-American community than the Republicans did in six years. This is not a matter of giving up your values. If you do that, you can't win elections."

The record speaks for itself, says Dean.

"This is not a matter of who likes Black people. This is a matter of this system and the Democratic Party has really worked incredibly well for African-Americans," Dean said. "The first thing



Sentinel-Voice photo by DNC

National Democratic Party Chairman Howard Dean (Center) laughs with civil rights icons former Congressman Walter Fauntroy, Revs. Jesse Jackson, Joseph Lowery and Al Sharpton. Still, some Black leaders wonder if Democrats really love Black people.

we did after the Democrats took over was raise the minimum wage. That disproportionately affects African-Americans. Sixteen percent of all African-American workers were affected by that minimum wage increase."

All 43 Black members of Congress are Democrats, he adds.

And with a record four Black committee chairs, 16 subcommittee chairs, and Black Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, D-S.C., those Blacks finally have historic power, Dean points out.

"So, I completely disagree with the notion that this is about whether Democrats love Black people or not. This is about Democrats creating a system where African-Americans could succeed."

That system is working says U.S. Rep. John Conyers, D-Mich., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and reputed dean of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Ticking off a list of House successes, including the Hate Crimes Act, the Emmett Till Act to solve unsolved civil rights crimes, the D.C. Voting Rights Act and the Anti-Voter Intimidation Act, Conyers says the drawback for even more aggressive legislation may be in the math.

With 233 Democrats and 202 Republicans in the House, there's only a margin of 31 votes, he says. Therefore, if 16 Democrats don't agree with the CBC and the leadership position and the Republicans stay organized, the Democrats lose.

Even the Democrats are divided, he points out.

There are 43 members of

the CBC, but there are 48 Blue Dogs, the conservative Democrats. "Our majority is quite frankly a very thin one," Conyers resolves.

Conyers praises Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., stating, "She's been cooperating with me fully."

That cooperation with African-Americans, however, has not transferred into the presidential race, civil rights leaders say.

"I am not supporting anybody," said Rev. Al Sharpton during a recent airing of his nationally syndicated radio talk show. "Until I know — whoever I support — where they are on issues like the

Supreme Court and they talk about specific cases, I am not — N-O-T," he spells the word for emphasis. "I am perfectly willing to be the one to force all of them to deal with these issues if I have to."

Democrats received 89 percent of the Black vote in the 2004 presidential election and Black voters are largely credited with the current Democratic majority in Congress.

Despite the allegiance, Hilary Shelton, director of the NAACP Washington Bureau and Capitol Hill lobbyist says less than 1 percent of the NAACP's legislative

agenda has come to a positive resolution and only about 10 percent has begun to move through the process.

Shelton stresses that this is only the first session of the 110th Congress, and he fully expects more progress on issues such as the drop out rate, high stakes testing in "No Child Left Behind," school construction, help for Hurricane Katrina victims, mandatory minimum sentences and the death penalty, which the NAACP opposes.

The NAACP is a non-partisan organization, but Shelton says he has noticed a difference since the Democrats took over.

"We're seeing more movement on our bills, more substantive movement," he said. "There was very little movement on these issues."

Still he dreads a possible change in political climate with pending House, Senate and presidential campaigns.

"I will say that we are very concerned about what happens when we get into 2008, an election year when the approach to politics begins to change significantly with the elections in mind," he said. "You'll have an awful lot of posturing going on. The real question is, in that posturing, will we see the kinds of commitment to actually implement programs that are important to our community?"

The answer is already clear, says Jesselyn McCurdy, legislative counsel for the American Civil Lib-

erties Union, another non-partisan organization that has discovered a bottle neck with civil rights legislation even with the Democratic Congress.

Describing the movement on key civil rights and criminal justice issues so far as "baby steps," McCurdy agrees that hope wanes as the elections near.

"The closer we come to the presidential election, there will be less willingness to address the issues that the civil rights community and African-Americans are concerned about in this country," she said. "Maybe some of these issues will be just put on the back burner because they give the [impression] of being soft on crime."

Dean says he will push for the presidential candidates to address more issues as the election nears.

"They've got to make their own decisions about what they're going to say, but I'm certainly going to add things to the agenda, like public education, like workforce training like supporting parents," he said.

Walters concedes that Black people — loved or not — really don't have much of a choice between the two parties, considering the right-wing associations of the Republican Party.

"They have scared the hell out of Black people," said Walters. "So that kind of keeps you at home. It doesn't give you much room to maneuver."

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