



An Hour With ... John Conyers Jr.

Congressman of Michigan's 13th Congressional District

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Rep. John Conyers Jr. is Congress' longest-serving member with over 50 years in office. Re-elected to his 27th term this past November, the "Dean of the House," will again swear in the speaker of the House this month (as he did for the last two House speakers). At age 87, Conyers is proof of what Claude Pepper said in 1978 when Congress passed legislation barring age discrimination: "Ageism is as odious as racism and sexism."

He's still committed to fighting for causes, including universal health care. "We've got Obamacare that took a few more million people out of the ranks of the people who were without health care," he says. "And yet we still have some way to go."

"The conservatives' huge financial forces [are] determined not to bring in a single-payer health care system," he says, wondering what they're fighting. "We have countries that have already employed a new, modern, updated health care system, and it's working. And guess what? It costs less."

Between constituent meetings in Michigan and committee meetings in Washington, Conyers maintains a busy schedule. We caught up with him in Washington prior to the November election, two hours before he was meeting with President Barack Obama. He acted like a young first-timer, telling us he was excited to be going to the White House.



Hour Detroit: Are Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders outliers or doesn't big money still matter in politics?

John Conyers Jr.: Unfortunately it matters way too much. We don't even know how much money is being spent in politics because it's disguised thanks to some of our legal experts, into super PACs that get money in and don't report it ... It makes a difference in the outcome of elections and on policies being developed. Climate change is a big one for me.

We've always dealt with Martin Luther King Jr.'s notion of jobs, justice, and peace. We have to defend and push forward on our ideas and our projects. The wealthiest and most powerful country on the planet is still faced with pockets of massive unemployment in places there shouldn't be. ... In parts of many cities that are minority communities, we have unemployment rates of 20, 25 percent. And it could be eliminated.

As much as the 44th president has done to make this a little bit better, Obama has succeeded far more than those conservatives who announced that they weren't going to let him do anything. ... But contrary to that, guess what? Obama has done quite well. And he has fought them in a way that builds up his own credibility, and exposed the stark cynicism of conservative political philosophy.

Should young people not be cynical about politics?

The whole idea of the advancement of minorities has taken root because of political activism. The African-American progress, which I credit Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. with restarting, happened due to the civil rights movement. As he ascended into leadership not only through his oratory, but also through his writing as well, and most of all, his political activism. ... Democracy isn't perfect. The Citizens United decision made it worse as an unbelievable attempt to take government out of requiring fair elections.

I see it as absolutely critical that we continue "boot camps" for young people to get interested. Because in the end, the decisions that determine who gets what in America (are) going to be made by our government.

Elections count. Votes do matter. It is incredibly important that we encourage as much participation as we can [and] turning out more people to express their opinion through the voting process is a help to the system itself, regardless of what the issues are. Because if you really don't believe that there are consequences, then you are asleep at the switch.

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John Conyers Jr.

On a NAFTA evaluation trip years ago, we didn't just take the Mexican government's PR spin. We went behind buildings and saw the raw sewage flowing. You came back outraged and said that NAFTA's a bad deal for American workers. Did Sanders and Trump bring Hillary Clinton into opposing trade deals like TPP?

To be honest, Bernie Sanders was and is more progressive than Hillary Clinton. [His supporters] forced Hillary Clinton and the whole Democratic Party into a better position. Bernie, when it's all said and done, has done us a big favor.

You're on a bipartisan congressional commission on policing strategies actions. How is that going?

It really helps that it's bipartisan. Both sides get a lot out of it. There is a lot of work to do on this serious national problem. You're always better when it's bipartisan.

What has changed in Congress over 50 years?

I'm dean now and started being the youngest. A lot has changed. The leadership looked the other way at the violence, the Klan. I'm headed for a meeting at the White House with the first African-American president. There has been enormous progress — though we still have to fight for more.

Resume

Name: John Conyers Jr.

Age: 87

Hometown: Detroit

Education: Northwestern High School, Wayne State University (undergraduate and legal studies)

SELECT COMMITTEES AND CAUCUSES

Judiciary Committee Member during President Richard Nixon's 1974 Watergate impeachment process and President Bill Clinton's 1998 impeachment

Founding member, Congressional Black Caucus

Chair, Committee on Government Operations

First African-American chair of the House Committee on the Judiciary, 2007-11

SELECT ACTS

1983: Martin Luther King Holiday Act

1987: Jazz Preservation Act

1994: Violence Against Women Act

2002: Help America Vote Act

2015: USA Freedom Act provision, ending bulk collection of Americans' phone numbers and calls by the NSA

2016: Created the Congressional Working Group on Policing Strategies and Police Community Relations

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