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Kennedy death ends era of Irish power

By: [Mitchell L. Moss](#)

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The dream may never die, but Sen. Ted Kennedy's death marks the end of the Irish in Democratic politics. For most of the 20th century, the Irish defined and controlled the political life of America's great cities and, through their machines, exercised hegemony over party politics.

Admittedly, the Irish role in Democratic politics has been fading for decades: New York has not had an Irish governor since 1982 or an Irish senator since 2000. Boston has not had an Irish mayor for more than 15 years. But as long as Kennedy was the dominant Democrat in the U.S. Senate, the Irish were a force to be recognized.

The Irish who immigrated to the United States in the 19th century were enterprising people who settled in the great industrial cities of that time: Boston, Buffalo, New York, Albany, Philadelphia, Chicago and San Francisco. Though the Irish rarely dominated a city's population, they forged alliances with other immigrants and minorities, giving them effective control over big city governments across the nation. For example, in San Francisco, the Irish made up one-third of the city's population in 1870 but were able to elect the first Irish-born mayor of an American city in 1867: Frank McCoppin, born in County Lonsford, Ireland.

The pain that stemmed from 800 years of brutal British rule over Ireland shaped Irish political values in the United States. They fought Protestants and rural interests who "sought to improve the immigrant poor rather than empower them," according to Peter Quinn, author of the forthcoming documentary, "The Road to the White House: From the Great Hunger to JFK."

Widespread poverty as well as overt discrimination against Catholics also energized the role of the Irish in politics. They realized that political coalitions were essential in order to get access to public jobs, fight anti-immigrant legislation and improve working conditions. The political clubhouse connected immigrants with jobs, helped the poor deal with government agencies and provided the equivalent of a "social safety net" — all in exchange for loyalty to the Democratic Party.

Naturally, there was also a theological underpinning for the Irish move into politics; in 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued a progressive papal encyclical, "Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Workers," which endorsed union organizing and government's role in social justice. Later, in 1919, the National Catholic Welfare Council built on Pope Leo's work with a progressive program that was the harbinger of the New Deal.

The media focus on Kennedy's death should not overshadow the pervasive impact of the Irish in shaping the Democratic Party for the past 100 years. Ted Kennedy was more than a Kennedy; he was the last of the Irish who came to power in the 20th century.

A century ago, on Manhattan's Lower East Side, a young Irish assemblyman, Alfred Emanuel Smith, built New York's modern Democratic Party by creating an alliance between Eastern European Jews and the Irish. Smith went on to become governor of New York and, in 1928, was the first Catholic to be nominated for president by a major political party. But New York state's seasoned Irish political leaders, Ed Flynn of the Bronx and James Farley of Rockland County, were central to the success of liberal Protestant Franklin D. Roosevelt, first in Roosevelt's role as governor of New York and then as president of the United States.

Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly was a pioneer in luring to the Democratic Party historically Republican blacks, who were still loyal to the Republican president who freed the slaves. The Daley family's capacity to sustain their hold on Chicago, long after the Irish have moved to the suburbs, highlights the endurance of the political machine created by the Irish. It is no accident that Chicago is the political home of President Barack Obama, for the Democratic Party's strength in the city rests on the long-standing support of African-American voters.

Nowhere has the Irish decline been more apparent than in the Northeast, once the seat of Irish political power. What was once an "Irish seat" in the U.S. Senate is now occupied by Kirsten Gillibrand. New York City has not had an Irish mayor in decades. The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, which gave us two speakers of the House in the late 20th century — John McCormack and Tip O'Neill — has produced presidential candidates but not a president of the United States since 1960.

Patrick Kennedy may be the congressman from Rhode Island, but the only member of the Kennedy clan holding a major elective office today is an Austrian-born movie star married to the daughter of the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Moreover, Arnold Schwarzenegger is a Republican from California.

While it is important to mourn the loss of Kennedy, it is also important to note that his death marks the end of an era when the Irish shaped Democratic Party politics. In fact, the last president with an Irish pedigree was Ronald Reagan, and he was a Protestant and a Republican.

The recent decline of the Irish in American politics has coincided with the rise of the Republic of Ireland as an independent and economically and culturally dynamic nation. But in the eyes of many, the Irish gains have been our loss.

Mitchell L. Moss is professor of urban policy and planning at New York University.

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