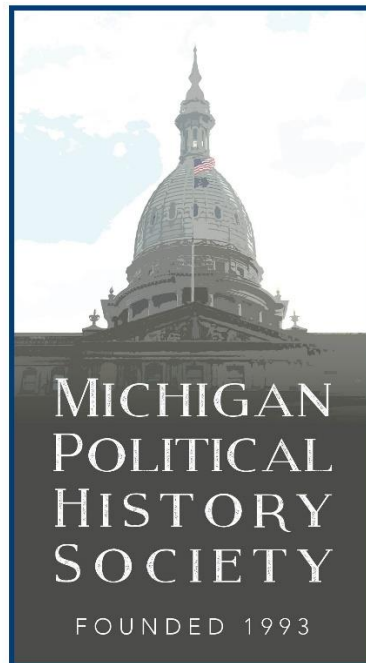


# **John Dingell**

Interviewed by  
Lynn Jondahl  
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Lynn Jondahl: It's a joy for me today to have the opportunity today to have the opportunity to talk to Congressman John Dingell, who has served in Congress longer than anyone else in history. That's an awesome record. Do you-

John D. Dingell: It's good luck, Lynn.

Lynn Jondahl: You had probably since, what was it, February, when you became the longest-serving member?

John D. Dingell: February 11th.

Lynn Jondahl: There's been a lot of recognition of that. Is there anything stands out in terms of those celebrations or the recognition that you've enjoyed?

John D. Dingell: Oh the big thing is the kindness of the people. It's just remarkable how gracious, and good, and kind they've been, both here in Michigan in my district and, of course, down in Washington. Debbie and I have a lot of friends, and they've been very good to us at this time.

Lynn Jondahl: You went into Congress, well you were elected in '55, 1955?

John D. Dingell: December 13th.

Lynn Jondahl: Okay. And you succeeded your father who passed away at that time.

John D. Dingell: He died in September, on the 19th. And he was elected to Congress, as you'll remember, in 1932.

Lynn Jondahl: '32 to '55, I think.

John D. Dingell: And so on the strength of his good name and distinguished record, I was lucky enough to get elected.

Lynn Jondahl: What was his agenda? What did he care most about?

John D. Dingell: Well, Dad was a New Dealer. Dad was one of the philosophers in the New Deal. Dad was a fellow who had come up as a poor Polish boy on the west side of Detroit, with all the problems that that carried with it. Detroit during that time, and most of the Polish community, were not doing financially very well. As a matter of fact, a lot of them, including our family, was dirt poor. But they were good. They were churchgoers. And they founded St. Casper's parish. Those things formed Dad. Dad was fired for union activity in 1914, so he became a strong trade unionist, both in his personal views and in his professional life.

Lynn Jondahl: Who did he, in what plant did he work or with what company, at the time he was fired?

John D. Dingell: 1914 was the date of the firing. I won't tell you the company, but they're still in business. And they are friends of mine and they were friends of Dad's. But they were not friendly towards unions at that particular time. As a matter of fact, that was a very bad union time. The union people used to wear their union buttons under their lapels or inside their hat. But anyway, Pop was author of Section 7-A of the Wagner Act, which allowed unions to organize, bargaining together collectively over working conditions, and working wages, and employment. He was the originator of the fight for national health insurance.

John D. Dingell: And he and Senators Murray and Wagner introduced what became the Dingell-Murray-Wagner Bill. And that was the thing over which much of the fighting was done to create a program of single-payer national health insurance. Roosevelt intended to do that in '36. But there was a war coming on and there was an economic downturn that hit and Roosevelt ran into some political heavygoing because of his attempt to pack the Supreme Court. And so that all, the wheels came off that particular one. Dad was also one of the early conservationists who wrote Dingell-Murray-Wagner, in which he put billions of dollars into conservation. It was the second really great federal conservation bill. It dealt with fisherman putting a tax, excise tax, on fishing tackle and products of that kind, followed on Pittman-Robertson, which put a tax on firearms and ammunition, all of which channeled through into the states to enable them to fund their state conservation programs. And it's turned out to be a tremendously successful program. And it's still one of the great programs, very much revered by conservationists and the state conservation agencies.

John D. Dingell: Dad had to get it, an interesting story, is Dad had to get it through over Truman's veto. Truman vetoed it. Dad, who was a loyal Democrat and a good friend of Truman, Dad took the veto. He didn't try to override it. But then after the session was at end, he went down to see Truman. He wrote Truman a letter, which I still have in my files, in which he says he's been a good soldier, has helped Truman, and he hoped that Truman and Dad's good friend, John Snyder, who was the secretary of treasury, would work with him to resolve the differences so this could become law. Privately, he told John Snyder, the secretary of treasury, that if they didn't play the right game with him on this, there'd be no tax legislation if Truman wanted that Ways and Means Committee. Pop was fellow who was fully capable of shaking good on any threat of that kind. Well the upside of the whole business was that it was finally passed, became law, and has been a great success ever since.

John D. Dingell: Dad wrote over 22 major amendments to the Social Security Act. Matter of fact, he wrote about 100. And as you know, that Social Security is very broad law. That's one of the safety net provisions that has, quite frankly, kept this economy going during this economic downturn. Because it included things like unemployment comp, and Medicare, and a wide array of other things. And of course, Dad was the original author of Medicare, which I had the privilege of

seeing to it pass the House. And matter of fact, John McCormack, my dad's good friend, let me preside over the House when we passed it.

Lynn Jondahl: McCormack was speaker at the time?

John D. Dingell: John McCormack was the speaker, wonderful man. He had the soul of an Irish poet. He was a great friend of my dad and I, and was one of my important mentors as I grew up.

Lynn Jondahl: You had been around Congress when your dad was there. Were you living in DC?

John D. Dingell: At that time, we would be in Washington during the time the House was in session, which I'm sure that after Dad came to Congress they passed the Lame Duck Amendment, which meant that the Congress came in in January. And then, because the heat and the nastiness in the summer in Washington, it's very, very unpleasant, they would adjourn around the 1st of June. And everybody would go home. Well, they air conditioned the Capitol when the war came on. So, of course, the Congress then went year-round and, as a result, Dad would take the family down to Washington when the session started. And he'd bring us home when it was over.

John D. Dingell: So in my very early days, I would go down with Dad and the family. And then we would come home when the session adjourned. And if there was business left over, the President would have a special session around the 1st of October. And then when the war came along, of course we were there year-round. And we didn't get home much anymore. And the Congress would stay down there for the whole year because they had to because we were fighting the war. Session would start January 3rd, end New Years night, or really New Years Eve, at midnight. And they'd oftentimes have to set the clock back so that there was not the appearance of violation of law by exceeding the time that the House and the Senate were supposed to be in session because of the workload of the war.

Lynn Jondahl: Had you ever run for office before the '55 election?

John D. Dingell: I ran for precinct delegate. And interestingly enough, I lost to a guy who was precinct delegate out there.

Lynn Jondahl: Well, it was good of us to bring that up, yeah.

John D. Dingell: Was pretty good. And he worked like hell. Frankly, he beat me. And that was a very important lesson because I learned if your gonna run for office, you better put everything you got into it, or you won't make it.

Lynn Jondahl: How tough was the '55 race?

John D. Dingell: The '55 race was one of the celebrated events of my life. It was one of the really exciting campaigns. It was a special election, so there was nobody else running at the time. It was in the middle of a newspaper strike, which meant that we had some kind of peculiar problems in terms of publicizing it. I had 23 people against us, including a former mayor.

Lynn Jondahl: Wow. Was the district totally in Detroit?

John D. Dingell: Yeah, it was totally. Detroit was in the ward system then. And it was, the old district was Wards 10, 12, 14, and 16. And you don't hear the wards anymore. I don't think they even use them anymore in the city of Detroit. And Soapy Williams, the Governor, called the election. And as I said, 23 people ran. Ernie Lacey, the former chairman of the District National Committee, he ran. And my friends in labor came through in a wonderful way, and Dad's friends came through, and we won. The principal poet in the primary was a wonderful black minister by the name of Reverend Charles A. Hill. He had a voice like thunder, was the pastor of Hartford Avenue Baptist Church, which was located over on West Grand Boulevard. And we had two rather brutal races, he and I. And then we became the best of friends.

Lynn Jondahl: So he challenged you another time, you mean, in another primary?

John D. Dingell: Well, he ran a second time against me.

Lynn Jondahl: Second time.

John D. Dingell: Scared the bejeebers out of me, but beat him.

Lynn Jondahl: All right. So the second time, there were just the two of you in the primary?

John D. Dingell: No, there were others. Primaries involving a young member of Congress, the young member generally looks particularly vulnerable, and so he attracts lots of opposition. One of the interesting things about the first race was I had a fellow in there that had run against Dad. And he was an interesting guy. His campaign platform was the same that he had had in 1932, and that was that the dollar should be dated so it could be depreciated 1% among those people who would have to spend their dollars. That didn't work really well in '32, and it didn't work very well in '55.

Lynn Jondahl: Probably wouldn't today either. So you've had five re-apportionments. Did the district change five or six times?

John D. Dingell: Probably. Probably more than that, Lynn, because not all re-apportionments take. You remember from your career in the legislature, is that the courts act. And the courts throw out the legislative re-apportionments. And sometimes the courts act alone. Sometimes the legislature will act. First reapportionment which we had in 1964, I think we went through three or four iterations of it.

Lynn Jondahl: Yeah, okay.

John D. Dingell: And at other times, we've had several. And sometimes courts have done it alone. Sometimes the legislature's done it. Sometimes the courts reviewed and thrown it out, sent it back to legislature. Sometimes the courts then proceed to do the redistricting.

Lynn Jondahl: In two instances that I know of, your race with T. John Lesinski and with Congressman Rivers, you were merged with other incumbents. Were those the toughest races?

John D. Dingell: They were tough races. The first race was a tough race. The race against T. John Lesinski, who is a friend of mine, son of a man who ran with my dad. And as an incumbent, was a very brutal race. The issue there was the Civil Rights Bill of '57, '64, for which I had voted, and for which he had voted against. At least the '64 one, he voted against. And feelings were running very, very high on that particular issue. The Wall Street Journal gave me a 1 in 15 chance of winning that race. But it turned out we did a little better than they figured. I figured out that we'd get about 55% of the vote. And it turned out we got 56. But the rest of the race went pretty well as planned. John had a speech impediment. And one of my campaign's issues was that the district needed somebody who could make an intelligent, comprehensible, understandable speech on the floor of the House.

John D. Dingell: We had to go around the district and explain to folks, "Why is it that you would support somebody who would vote against a black man being able to vote when a white man is able to vote? That's one of the important attributes of citizenship. And if everybody can't do it, we don't really have a democracy." And the people were very good and very fair, and the result was that we won. And one of the interesting results is, within the 16th, which is a wonderful district and they have wonderful people, we would have get-togethers. And the get-togethers would involve folks from both sides. And if you hadn't been in the election, you wouldn't know who was on which side because we were all friends. And we'd all tell stories. We'd just have a great time talking about it and laughing about it. And all of the people who were involved on both sides were great friends of mine. It was a wonderful race.

John D. Dingell: With Lynn, we had another one. One of the interesting things about it is that the election of '50, rather '64, was a time when there was a landslide against the Republicans, as you'll remember. Goldwater scared the bejeebers out of everybody by threatening to use the atom bomb. And it cost him dear. But the Republicans put six incumbent congressmen in three districts. They had two Republicans in the north, Bennett Knox, that they put in the same district. And then they put Nedzi and Harold Ryan in one district on the east side. And they put Lesinski and I in the same district over here. Some of that was to create a district so that people in the legislature could run. That happened again, as you will note, in 2002. But the upshot of the whole business was that George Romney was trying to create a change in the delegation. There were 12

Republicans and 7 Democrats, 19 members. And he wound up with exactly the same numbers. But the numbers had changed in one important particular. There were, after the election, 12 Democrats and 7 Republicans. They wound up losing five seats with his manipulations.

John D. Dingell: And in '64 and '65 was a remarkable year. We got Medicare through. Johnson came in, had a wonderful record of legislative accomplishment, federalized education, Medicare, Medicaid, an array of conservation bills. I made Johnson fund the Clean Water Act. In full, they have spent \$16 billion dollars which he was, at first, very angry about but which, quite frankly, saved the Great Lakes, cleaned up the water of the nation, and was one of the great conservation accomplishments of our history.

John D. Dingell: The race against Lynn was somewhat similar. In both instances, they didn't give me a very good chance of winning. But we forged a good plan and went out and ran a good race.

Lynn Jondahl: You said civil rights was a major issue in the Lesinski race.

John D. Dingell: In '64.

Lynn Jondahl: What about in the case of Lynn? Were there key issues?

John D. Dingell: Well, the big question was, was I liberal enough? What the legislature did was they took a blue-collar laborer industrial district.

Lynn Jondahl: Not her base.

John D. Dingell: No, my district. Her base was Ann Arbor. And they mixed the two. They took some of my district away from me and some of her district away from her. They left her her strength, and they took a lot of my strength away. The upshot of the whole business was that we forged a good plan. We decided we're not gonna do much running in Ann Arbor, which was her strength, but we'd work just hard enough there that she'd have to stay home and work. When the ballots were counted, we got 60% of the vote in our district. Outside of Monroe, we got 80% of the over in Monroe. She made an issue out of firearms ownership. She knew I'm a strong supporter of the Second Amendment. And she ran as being more liberal than I, and that I'm some kind of a conservative. And the people didn't believe it.

John D. Dingell: We went into a lot of her district and took whole areas and lots of people away from her. And we had my good friends in labor, and we picked up strong support in the African American community. Poles, and the Italians, and the ethnic groups with whom I have an historic friendship, they came through in big order. And the result was that about 10:30 that night, I got a concession. Lynn was very gracious about it. And we ran on what was essentially a good, clean campaign. She had EMILY's List, which came in and dumped 5 million dollars

into the race. I had to raise three million, most expensive race I ever ran. I spent more in that race than I had spent in all of the races previous.

Lynn Jondahl: Is that right, more with the one?

John D. Dingell: And happily, we haven't had that kind of exercise since.

Lynn Jondahl: So your first race and those two were the toughest.

John D. Dingell: I had some other races that were difficult. We had, in '72, we had the issue of busing, and cross-district busing to achieve racial balance in the schools. Nedzi, and O'Hara, and Billy Ford almost lost over it. But we had the redistricting that year. I took a lot of Billy's problem areas. And as a result, Billy Ford, who is a great friend of mine, won, which he probably wouldn't have done. Nedzi and O'Hara almost lost that year over that particular issue. It was really a spurious issue.

Lynn Jondahl: Was it drawn in your race?

John D. Dingell: But it was one that got people very excited.

Lynn Jondahl: In your race, was it a key issue?

John D. Dingell: It was an important issue, but we handled it politically better.

Lynn Jondahl: How did you shape your message?

John D. Dingell: Well, it was an interesting thing. Bella Abzug got on me one time on the House floor.

Lynn Jondahl: She was the congresswoman from New York.

John D. Dingell: From New York. She's a very left-wing, kind of outrageous person with big hats, quite frankly. There's a funny story I should tell about Bella, which I won't tell today. But she said I was a racist demagogue. She said so on the floor. She got the floor taken away for her and couldn't speak for a day. That nearly killed her. But she came over to me afterwards, and said, "You're a racist demagogue." I said, "Bella, I'm a racist demagogue and I represent a whole district full of racist demagogues. We hold integrated meetings to denounce damn fools like you that want to bus our kids to areas far away from their homes, and their families, and their neighborhoods, and put them in danger." I said, "And our African American folks, and our white folks, all resent this idea. And I'm gonna do everything I can to stop this sort of nonsense, and see that we give first-class education to our kids in their neighborhood schools." And that was the policy that ultimately came to be. And it's still the best policy to educate your kids close to home.



Lynn Jondahl: So you carried the history and reputation as a civil rights advocate. But in this instance, you were objecting to a particular issue.

John D. Dingell: But the point, the point, Lynn, is that we, in fact, had very broad interracial opposition to this silly idea. And our African American folks were just as much opposed to it as we white folks. So the end result was that it failed, as it well should have. And I had the support of every racial group in the district on my petition because they didn't want their kids moved away so that they couldn't get to them if there was a problem in the school or if there was a problem with the child's health. That worries every parent that I know of because I've got four.

Lynn Jondahl: You talked about your father and your history of support for labor unions. You've also historically been a supporter, obviously. How close are we sitting to the Ford Global Headquarters here in the district?

John D. Dingell: Ford Headquarters is up the road probably about three-quarters of a mile.

Lynn Jondahl: Your district and constituents have been involved in the auto industry. How has your role changed, if it has?

John D. Dingell: It hasn't changed a bit. I've always supported labor. I've always supported the people who work in the auto industry. And as you very well know, I've been one of those who has seen to it that autos made in the United States are the safest, the cleanest, most fuel-efficient in the world. But interestingly enough, I've seen to it that they have done so under circumstances and on a schedule that was meetable without disrupting the industry and without destroying the jobs of my people.

Lynn Jondahl: Did you have a personal relationship with Walter Reuther?

John D. Dingell: Walter and I, Roy and Victor, his brothers, were good friends. I've been good friends with almost every major labor leader, and the head, and the officers of almost every local union in my district, whether it's UAW, or AFL-CIO, or whether it's building trades, or craft union, or industrial union. And that includes steel workers, and the communication workers, and the building trades, and folks like the carpenters and joiners. They're all friends of mine.

Lynn Jondahl: The Reuthers are looked at by many as visionaries in terms of building a middle class.

John D. Dingell: Well, you're absolutely right. The middle class was created by two things. One was the New Deal and Franklin Roosevelt. And Franklin was castigated as a traitor to his class by people of wealth. And he played out that he was saving America. We had more communists, by the way, in this country than there were in the Soviet Union. He was scared to death that there was gonna be a Communist push. So he did things to create the safety net in the middle class,

not least of which was creating the American labor movement. Prior to passage of the Wagner Act and section 7-A, which was authored by my dad, it was illegal to join a union and to try to bargain collectively over wages and working conditions of employment. And so if you will look, you will find at that time, they passed workman's comp, and unemployment comp, and social security, and all manner of things for la-