19. The New Deal Democrats: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party

With Franklin D. Roosevelt at its helm, the Democratic Party underwent a historic transformation. Before FDR rose to national prominence in the early 1930s, the party had represented a loose conglomeration of local and regional interests. Dominated by the “solid South” that dated to post–Civil War Reconstruction, this group also included Great Plains and Western farmers influenced by the Populist and Progressive movements, as well as the burgeoning ethnic populations of the great cities of the North and East, where the “machine politics” epitomized by New York City’s Tammany Hall ruled the day.

This diverse assemblage did not adhere to a central ideology or political philosophy, but was instead heavily influenced by religious and geographical identities and interests. Democrats might be found on both sides of a variety of political issues. Ironically, the party was home to both the new waves of heavily Catholic and Jewish immigrants of the Northeast and the extremely anti-Catholic and nativist Ku Klux Klan of the South.

The Republicans enjoyed significant support across a fairly wide spectrum of the American political landscape. That party was heavily favored by northern white Protestants, small and large business interests, professional white-collar workers, and, thanks in part to the Progressive wing of the party, many factory workers and western farmers. As the party of Lincoln, it also had the strong support of the African American community.

FDR would reconfigure these alliances, shaping a Democratic coalition that would take in the majority of working people, farmers, and racial minorities—including millions of new voters. This coalition would bring enormous change to America, remaining at the fulcrum of its political life for generations. Indeed, FDR’s election in 1932 ended a long period of Republican dominance in national politics—since 1860 only two Democrats had taken the White House—and ushered in a period of Democratic dominance.

The disaster of the Great Depression helped FDR take the presidency in 1932 and begin this historic political shift. But FDR’s ability to try new approaches, correct mistakes, and adapt to changing circumstances helped him hold together his newly formed Democratic coalition during the twelve tumultuous years of his presidency.
The 1932 Election and Its Impact

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s landslide victory in the 1932 presidential election owed much to voters’ disgust over incumbent Herbert Hoover’s failure to halt the downward spiral of the Great Depression. But FDR also brought to bear a carefully honed Democratic political apparatus. After securing the party’s nomination for president in July 1932, FDR the candidate had taken charge of its national organization by placing James Farley—his campaign manager—as chairman of the Democratic National Committee. Farley would head the National Committee throughout the critical period of the 1930s and, along with FDR’s longtime political aide, Louis Howe, play an important part in strengthening the party and winning elections for FDR.

Of all his electoral victories, FDR’s first election to the presidency was arguably the most consequential for party politics. On November 8, 1932, he became the first Democratic candidate since 1852 to win an absolute majority of the popular vote—57.4 percent, versus Hoover’s 39.7 percent. In this lopsided win, FDR established Democratic majorities in virtually every region of the country. He reestablished the Democratic Party’s dominance below the Mason-Dixon Line and took every state west of the Mississippi—something no Democrat had ever done. FDR also did very well in most industrial cities.

FDR’s sweep helped Democrats win seats nationwide. The party made significant gains in state legislatures and in gubernatorial races, and established a solid majority in both houses of Congress—congressional majorities that would persist, with only two brief interruptions, until the election of 1980.

In the new Congress that convened in 1933, Democrats outnumbered Republicans
II. Hope, Recovery, Reform: The Great Depression and FDR’s New Deal

19. The New Deal Democrats: Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party

But while such broad majorities might seem to give FDR a free hand to enact sweeping reforms, ideological divisions within the Democratic Party made pressing his reform agenda a complex task requiring considerable political skill.

The most fervent support for the New Deal, for example, came from a variety of liberal groups—urban reformers, midwestern and western Progressives (many of whom were Republicans), and southern Populists. They agreed that the government should promote economic recovery by hiring people for public-works projects and giving direct relief to the poor. But they sometimes disagreed sharply on fiscal and monetary issues such as balancing the budget and controlling inflation, on how best to establish regional priorities, and especially on race and civil rights issues.

Meanwhile, conservative Democrats—particularly those from the South—opposed FDR on numerous fronts. They wanted to stimulate economic growth not through public works but via subsidies to industry, agriculture, and banks. They opposed government spending that exceeded revenues. They tended to be antiuion and were firmly against the federal government extending legal protections to workers or racial minorities.

FDR’s challenge, as president and head of the party, was to bring these disparate elements together into a coherent national political force that would rally around his “New Deal” for the American people.

For the Republican Party, the 1932 election was a disaster from which it would take years to recover. While many Republicans—dismayed at Hoover’s ineffectual response to the economic crisis—chose to switch parties and vote for FDR, millions more simply stayed home and did not vote at all. In the meantime, millions of new immigrants and working-class citizens who had never voted before came out to support FDR.

The election of 1932 was a critical step in establishing the “Roosevelt coalition” that made the Democratic Party by and large the party of working people and farmers. This appealing image stood in stark contrast to that of the Hoover Republicans, whose seemingly cool indifference to the millions who suffered in the Great Depression led to charges, especially among Progressive Republicans, that the Grand Old Party (GOP) had become elitist. With the historic shift that brought FDR to office, class identity was becoming a more important element in elections and in political life generally.

The 1932 election of Franklin D. Roosevelt began a forty-year period in which the Roosevelt coalition and its ideas dominated American political life.
The Onset of the New Deal, Voices of Protest, and the Election of 1936

Once in power, Franklin D. Roosevelt focused on forging a broad political coalition to support the New Deal. The unprecedented urgency of the economic crisis, coupled with FDR's political acumen, charm, and resounding confidence, made lawmakers unusually eager to work with the new president.

With strong support from Democrats and many liberal Republicans, FDR was able to push through a record-setting sixteen major pieces of legislation in his first hundred days in office. These included measures to reduce unemployment, significant banking and financial reform, and efforts to harmonize the work of business and labor to promote industrial recovery.

These impressive legislative successes, along with others that followed in 1933 and '34, raised the Democratic Party's popularity to new heights. Democratic majorities in the House and Senate expanded in the 1934 midterm elections. But in keeping with the party's disparate factions, many New Deal programs and laws contained contradictory elements. And early efforts to forge ties with business interests through the National Industrial Recovery Act largely foundered.

By 1935—in spite of renewed growth in the economy and a roughly 10 percent drop in unemployment—voices of protest had emerged on both the left and the right. Some thought the Roosevelt administration's interventions hadn't gone far enough. Others criticized the administration for intervening too aggressively in the economy.

One such group was the deeply conservative American Liberty League. Funded by large corporate interests and convinced that the New Deal was inspired by fascism, socialism, or communism, the Liberty League (cofounded by Democrat Al Smith) saw economic planning and regulation as a threat to American values, the growth of the national debt as a sign of permanent economic decline, and the New Deal itself as the enemy of private enterprise and hence of the Constitution.

On the left, FDR had to contend with populist demagogues like Huey Long, whose "Share the Wealth" movement promised a home and guaranteed income for every American; Father Charles Coughlin, "the radio priest" who denounced FDR as a tool of international bankers; and Dr. Francis Townsend, whose Townsend Plan to give every American over the age of sixty $200 per month was wildly popular among the elderly and led to the establishment of thousands of Townsend Clubs across the country.

FDR brushed aside attacks from the American Liberty League, exposing the organization's narrow corporate funding and insisting the United States was a rich nation that could "afford to pay for security and prosperity without having to sacrifice our liberties into the bargain." But his concern over the inequalities in American society that had helped inspire other protest movements led FDR to launch what became known as the Second New Deal. Here, what FDR...
sought was not merely temporary relief, but deep structural reform, reform that would mitigate the worst excesses of unfettered industrial capitalism and provide the average American with a measure of economic security.

The result was the passage of two of the most important pieces of legislation to come out of the New Deal: the National Labor Relations Act, which enshrined the right of workers to form unions and engage in collective bargaining; and the Social Security Act, which provided old-age pensions to working Americans, support for the blind and the disabled, and the first nationwide program of unemployment insurance.

These reforms were enormously popular among the public and helped FDR win reelection in 1936 by a massive landslide, carrying over 60 percent of the popular vote and all but two states (Maine and Vermont) in the Electoral College. America’s double-down vote for FDR further strengthened the foundation of the modern Democratic Party. The vast majority of working Americans, the labor movement, and the overwhelming majority of African Americans and Hispanic Americans now voted Democratic.

The Democratic Party’s broadening appeal also manifested itself in Congress. In the House, Democrats added 12 seats, making their 334-to-88 majority the largest since Reconstruction. In the Senate they picked up 6 seats, for a total of 76, as opposed to 16 held by the Republicans and 4 held by other parties.

Top: A “Roosevelt Caravan” during Franklin D. Roosevelt’s campaign for reelection, August 21, 1936, in Washington, DC. Though FDR’s New Deal had critics on both the left and the right, the people reelected him that year and gave Democrats their largest majority in the House of Representatives since Reconstruction. FDRL.

Bottom: In the Democratic Party’s campaign for 1936, two women present a display illustrating the abundance of 1936 compared with the painfully lean year of 1932. The New Deal Franklin D. Roosevelt had rolled out in the four intervening years was popular with the public, helping FDR win by a landslide in 1936 and consolidate the party’s base, which now included the great majority of working people. FDRL.
Second-Term Missteps, the 1938 Election, and the End of Reform

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s massive electoral victory of 1936 left him confident in the people’s mandate and determined to carry out his policies. But the measures he embarked upon in 1937 and 1938 would harden conservative opposition to his agenda, creating an important setback for the New Deal.

Frustrated that the U.S. Supreme Court had struck down key provisions of the New Deal, FDR made his first misstep when he tried to expand the number of justices on the court, in effect diluting the power of its conservative justices. The fierce objections this aroused provided a vehicle around which his natural opponents—including many southern Democrats—could rally.

The second thing FDR did that slowed his administration’s momentum was to follow the advice of his more conservative economic advisors and cut back on the New Deal’s deficit spending. FDR believed, by the end of 1936, that this spending had done its work in stimulating the economy and could safely be abandoned. Indeed, since 1933 the U.S. economy had expanded by an average of 14 percent per year, and the unemployment rate had dropped from its unprecedented high of 25 percent in March 1933 to just over 14 percent. But FDR’s cutbacks reversed this progress, bringing on, in the spring of 1937, one of the sharpest economic downturns in history—the so-called Roosevelt recession.

To counter this unfortunate turn of events, FDR quickly reversed himself and went back to Congress to seek a massive stimulus bill designed to put people back to work and repair damage to the still-fragile economy. Growth returned and the recovery was soon back on track. But the political damage wasn’t easy to mend. Critics of the New Deal used the recession as proof that FDR’s economic agenda—in spite of vast improvement in the economy since 1933—was a failure.

Finally, FDR miscalculated during the midterm election season of 1938, campaigning to unseat anti-New Deal members of Congress—especially southern Democrats—in a way that many saw an attempt to “purge” the party. Only one of the candidates FDR put forward went on to win a seat in Congress, and his campaigning helped solidify conservative resistance to his leadership. The result was a significant gain by Republicans in Congress in the 1938 midterm elections.

By the end of 1938, a powerful anti-New Deal coalition had taken shape among conservative Democrats and Republicans in Congress. This alliance would make it all but impossible for FDR and his administration to enact more major reforms—with the notable exception of the G.I. Bill of June 1944.
The Elections of 1940 and 1944 and the Long-Term Legacy of the “Roosevelt Revolution”

During the Second World War, Franklin D. Roosevelt won unprecedented third and fourth terms in the presidency, and the Democratic Party continued to enjoy majorities in both the Senate and the House. The political realignment he had achieved between 1933 and 1938 continued to function. But the conservative anti–New Deal coalition formed in 1938 also persisted. As a result, Congress would shut down many of the programs launched during the 1930s to combat the Great Depression, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration.

The country reelected FDR in 1940—and kept him in office until his untimely death in 1945—mainly because Americans trusted him to lead them through another emergency, that of global war. FDR marshaled significant support in both parties for his deft management of the international alliance that would subdue the Axis powers in that conflict. He garnered this broad support for his war leadership in part by appointing two very high-profile Republicans to his war cabinet in the summer of 1940, despite their sharp criticism of the New Deal; Henry Stimson became secretary of war and Frank Knox secretary of the navy.

FDR also made it a point to include members of the Republican congressional leadership in his efforts to create such key postwar institutions as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the United Nations. The Democratic Party largely supported these efforts as well, with FDR’s leadership pushing Democrats to coalesce around the idea that it was vitally important for the United States to promote human rights and prosperity around the world. As a result, the United States would become the leading proponent of the multilateral world order and global economy that prevail today. FDR effectively ended decades of American isolationism.

Taken together, the domestic and international policies that FDR pursued transformed the basic nature of the Democratic Party. Although he frequently had to battle the conservative tendencies of southern Democrats, the Democratic Party forged under FDR’s leadership was a far more coherent and powerful political force than the party he inherited in 1932.

Above all else, what emerged from this unlikely coalition of disparate social, economic, religious, and geographical factions was a fundamental belief that government can and must be responsible for providing all Americans some measure of social and economic security—and for protecting equal opportunity for all.

The party FDR formed would dominate the American political landscape for decades to come, bringing a host of new reforms—from Medicare to government investment in green technologies—based on models hammered together under FDR’s inventive leadership.