20. Chief Executive: 
Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress, and the Presidency

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s dealings with the U.S. Congress were profoundly consequential, not just for the policies they yielded, but also for the way they shaped the relationship between the federal government’s executive and legislative branches. No president, in fact, had a greater impact on this relationship. By the waning days of FDR’s twelve-year presidency in the spring of 1945, a fundamental shift had taken place in Washington, DC. The White House—not Congress—was now widely seen as the leading institution in American government. FDR brought stature and scope to the presidential role, an importance the office would hold in the eyes of the American people for generations to come.

This historic shift is partly attributable to the singular longevity of FDR’s presidency—he is the only president in American history to serve more than two terms—and to the country’s extraordinary need for leadership during the twin crises of the 1930s and ‘40s.

But FDR stepped into the job as no one else could have. His strength in Congress rested in part on the fact that he had cobbled together a pan-ethnic, multiregional Democratic coalition that took in southern Democrats and big-city machines, farmers and industrial workers; indeed, this coalition also attracted progressive Republicans. Critics have sometimes described FDR as intellectually facile, his New Deal lacking a
grand design or ideological unity. But FDR’s implacable civility, and his preference for pragmatic experimentation over clannish adherence to ideology, helped him gain the support he needed to get things done.

FDR was a natural leader. Whether due to his patrician background, his upbringing as an intensely cherished only child, or his trial with polio—he once said that after you’ve spent two years lying in bed trying to move your big toe, everything else seems easy—FDR possessed an extraordinary confidence and ease, coupled with abundant energy. He shed a sunny good cheer on the very darkest of days and made people around him feel that all would be well.

His willingness to lead, evident from the day he took office, met with relief among Washington lawmakers shaken to their roots by the events of the Great Depression—a banking system in collapse, a quarter of workers idled, farmers producing much but earning next to nothing. As Hiram Johnson, a progressive Republican senator from California, put it at the time, “The admirable trait in Roosevelt is that he has the guts to try. He does it all with the rarest good nature. . . . We have exchanged for a frown in the White House a smile. . . . Where there were hesitation and vacillation . . . feebleness, timidity, and duplicity, there are now courage and boldness and real action.”

FDR would capitalize on this rapport by taking an unusually active role in congressional affairs. He proposed a great deal of legislation, sent many special messages to Congress, called its leadership to the White House to confer with him personally, and practiced the presidential veto more than any other chief executive before or since.

Indeed, while FDR sometimes accomplished his goals by deferring to powerful political forces—the southern senators and congressional isolationists, for example—he also stood up to opponents with unflappable determination, often infuriating powerful corporate interests, for example. “One thing is for sure—that the idea people get from his charming manner—that he is soft or flabby in disposition and character—is far from true,” wrote advisor Raymond Moley. “When he wants something a lot, he can be formidable; when crossed, he is hard, stubborn, resourceful, relentless.”

FDR also elevated the presidency by communicating directly, as no president before him, with the American people. In his first radio talk a week after taking office, he addressed a public yearning for leadership and reassurance as “my friends.” A reporter would soon dub these novel presidential broadcasts “fireside chats,” an apt description of the lively, intimate way FDR talked about the affairs of the nation in his mellifluous voice. FDR’s presidency likewise inaugurated a newly direct relationship with the press. He held regular press conferences, engaging in spontaneous, frank exchanges with reporters while always maintaining control of information.

He often used both these forums to explain—and gain popular support for—policies he was promoting in Congress. In late 1940, for example, he addressed the press and then (over the radio) the public about his plan for a Lend-Lease program that would open the floodgates of American aid to the British, who then stood alone against the Nazis. In both venues, he explained that the program would be like lending a garden hose to a neighbor whose house was on fire—and upwind.

FDR’s bond with the American people and the thunderous mandate he received in the elections of 1932 and 1936 gave him a strong hand to play in Congress. After that, he made some costly missteps, and the 1940 election was much more hard-fought. Still, in that year when the threat of global war loomed, and again in 1944 as the United States and its allies anticipated a final victory in the conflagration, a majority of American voters thought it best to keep FDR in the White House. FDR died a few months after being elected to a fourth term, the people’s appetite for his leadership having outlived the man.
A

The Hundred Days and Birth of the New Deal

Almost immediately upon taking office in the midst of the Great Depression, Franklin D. Roosevelt got down in the trenches of lawmakers, setting a new tone for the way presidents work with Congress. Having noted in his inaugural speech the public’s demand for “action, and action now,” he called Congress into emergency session before the day was out. Over the next hundred days—in what would become the most dynamic period of legislative activity in the history of American government—he would help shuttle through that legislative body sixteen major pieces of law.

The first issue on his agenda: the collapse of the American banking system. To halt a nationwide run on banks and prevent further losses, FDR declared an immediate “bank holiday,” while Treasury officials from both the outgoing Herbert Hoover administration and incoming Roosevelt administration, in an unprecedented collaboration, worked frantically to craft a new law that would give the government the powers it needed to end the crisis. The result was the Emergency Banking Act, proposed to Congress on March 9, 1933; FDR had been president five days. House members passed the bill that same day after hearing the only available copy read aloud. The Senate then passed the bill by an overwhelming majority.

After signing the bill that evening, FDR went on the radio to deliver the first of his famous “fireside chats.” He explained the banking crisis to the American people, assuring them that, thanks to the new law organizing and reopening the banks, their deposits would be safe. FDR’s directness and concern inspired Americans, who lined up the next day to redeposit their money in the nation’s banks. The banking crisis was over.

Further financial and banking reform legislation followed. Then FDR moved on to push for measures to provide relief for the unemployed, dispossessed, and poor. These included employing hundreds of thousands of idle young men through the launch of our nation’s first green jobs program, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC); rescuing millions of homes and farms from foreclosure through the establishment of the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation and the passage of the Farm Credit Act; the launch of our nation’s first major public utility, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA); and the expansion of the nation’s infrastructure through the establishment of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and other agencies.

Throughout this remarkable period, FDR enjoyed strong support from both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. Indeed, members of both houses either initiated or refined a number of bills passed during the first hundred days. In a very real sense, then, the achievements of this period, which gave birth to the New Deal, can be attributed to the exceptional degree of cooperation between the executive and legislative branches of government, as well as between the two major political parties, in the midst of an unprecedented crisis.

Franklin D. Roosevelt at his inauguration on March 4, 1933, at the U.S. Capitol. In the next few days, FDR would work nearly around the clock with Treasury officials on the first major problem before them: the collapse of American banking. Staff finished the emergency banking bill at 3 a.m. on March 9. An eager Congress passed it by dinnertime that day. On March 12, FDR went on the radio to explain the banking crisis to the American people and ask for their help in resolving it. LOC
The Second New Deal

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s out-of-the-gate success during his first hundred days, coupled with further New Deal reform and relief measures passed in his first two years in office, garnered strong support among the American public. As a result, FDR became one of only three presidents in American history to gain congressional seats for his party during his administration’s first midterm election. With the backing of a large majority of these Democrats and many liberal Republicans as well, FDR launched what became known as the Second New Deal late in his first term.

The Second New Deal would provide millions of Americans with skilled jobs building the nation’s economic infrastructure via the Works Progress Administration, established in 1935 with the passage of the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act. Congress also passed the Soil Conservation and Domestic Allotment Act, which encouraged farmers to preserve one of the nation’s most precious resources—its topsoil; the Rural Electrification Act, which provided jobs to thousands and “wired” the country by bringing the benefits of electric power to millions of rural Americans; and the Public Utility Act, which was designed to reduce the cost of electric power by regulating the utility industry and forcing the breakup of large-scale power monopolies.

Most important, the Second New Deal also saw the passage of two landmark reform efforts: the National Labor Relations Act, which enshrined the right of workers to form unions, and the Social Security Act, which gave Americans not only Social Security, but also the first nationwide program of unemployment insurance.

FDR is one of only three presidents in American history to gain Congressional seats for his party during his administration’s first midterm election.
The 1936 Election, the Supreme Court, and a “Roosevelt Recession”

The passage of such important pieces of reform legislation as the National Labor Relations Act and Social Security Act was not without controversy. Many conservatives opposed these measures, including a number of conservative Democrats, especially from the South. But the New Deal reforms were enormously popular among the public, and as a consequence FDR won reelection in 1936 by a landslide, carrying over 60 percent of the popular vote and all but two states in the Electoral College—Maine and Vermont, which voted for the Republican presidential candidate, Alf Landon.

Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fellow Democrats in Congress also did well. In the House, the Democrats added 12 seats, making their 334-to-88 majority the largest since Reconstruction. In the Senate, meanwhile, the Democrats picked up another 6 seats, for a total of 76, as opposed to 16 held by the Republicans and 4 held by other parties.

Bolstered by his success at the polls—and lacking the keen political advice of his longtime aide, Louis Howe, who died in April 1936—FDR embarked on a series of measures in 1937 that would cause him considerable political difficulty. The first involved FDR’s attempt to reform the Supreme Court; the second involved the onset of the so-called Roosevelt recession, the result of an untimely attempt by the Roosevelt administration to balance the 1937–38 budget.

“Packing” the court
FDR’s struggle with the court began with a series of rulings the justices rendered late in his first term. In May 1935, for example, the court struck down the National Industrial Recovery Act and the Agricultural Adjustment Act—two key provisions of the New Deal. FDR was livid, and, fearing for the fate of such landmark legislation as the National Labor Relations Act and Social Security Act, he decided to take on the Supreme Court by unleashing what critics called a “court-packing” plan in February 1937.

The plan proposed the president be allowed to appoint up to six additional judges to the bench, one for every sitting justice who refused to retire after reaching his seventieth birthday. FDR was within legal bounds to request a change in the court’s makeup, and he was not alone in his call for judicial reform. But, perhaps overly emboldened by his election mandate, FDR had failed to prepare the way for his plan, introducing it suddenly and without congressional consultation. The proposal ran afoul of the public’s reverence for the court and its role in the balance of powers; it inspired indignant opposition, even among members of Roosevelt’s own party. As time went on, what congressional support there was for the plan eroded, and after some months the bill was quietly allowed to die in the Senate before it ever came to a vote.

Most historians agree that FDR’s court reform scheme dealt a major political blow to his presidency, strengthening an emerging anti–New Deal coalition among conservative Democrats and Republicans in Congress. This would make it harder for FDR to advance the New Deal in coming years. But the judicial reversals he had feared did not come to pass. On the contrary, in the midst of the controversy the court began upholding every New Deal statute that came before it, launching a new era of jurisprudence; in a nutshell, the court would now permit the government to regulate the economy.

The “Roosevelt recession”
Somewhat paradoxically, the “Roosevelt recession” resulted in part from the New Deal’s success. FDR had long wanted to balance the federal budget, and his administration had always included budget hawks who urged him to insist on fiscal conservatism. But in the midst of the...
Depression, FDR had sided with other advisors and authorized deficit spending on a large scale to create jobs, build American infrastructure, and get the economy moving in the process. Since 1933, the tide had turned. The economy had been expanding rapidly, at an average rate of 14 percent per year. Moreover, unemployment, though still high, had fallen by more than 10 percent. Given the improved situation, FDR now took the advice of administration officials schooled in economic orthodoxy, and, in the spring of 1937, he moved to cut the budget, reduce deficit spending, and control inflation by tightening the money supply. The result was unmitigated disaster.

FDR had launched one of the sharpest economic downturns in American history. In just a few short months, the gross domestic product declined 13 percent, industrial production fell 33 percent, wages dropped by more than a third, and some four million people lost their jobs. No fool, FDR quickly reversed himself and went back to Congress to seek a massive stimulus bill to put people back to work and repair the damage to a still-fragile economy. Within three months, growth had returned and the economy was back on track.

But the Roosevelt recession gave ammunition to the New Deal’s conservative critics, and this, coupled with FDR’s ill-timed and ill-conceived attempt to reform the Supreme Court, resulted in a significant reversal for the Democrats in the 1938 midterm elections. FDR’s historic collaboration with a Congress that for the most part rowed vigorously in the same direction as the president was coming to an end.

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Source: The American Presidency Project
The 1938 Elections and the End of Reform

The midterm elections of 1938 were a serious political setback for Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Republicans picked up eighty-one seats in the House while taking seven seats from the Democrats in the Senate. Worse still, FDR’s attempt to move his own party to the left by attacking conservative southern candidates in the primaries—the press called it a “purge”—had largely backfired, making conservative members of the party all the more willing to vote against the president.

As a result, by late 1938 the anti–New Deal coalition that had been emerging in Congress among conservative Republicans and Democrats was now firmly in place, rendering further New Deal–style congressional reforms all but impossible.

In 1939 the more conservative nature of the Congress became apparent as it slashed appropriations for the massive jobs program known as the Works Progress Administration and authorized an investigation into the newly formed National Labor Relations Board.

A migrant worker at a camp in Yakima Valley, Washington, in an image by photographer Dorothea Lange, August 1939. Earlier that year, a more conservative Congress had slashed the Works Progress Administration budget, and this migrant complained that its laid-off workers were beating out migrants for jobs. “Them WPAs are keeping us from a living,” he said. “They oughtn’t to do it. It ain’t fair in no way. The government lays them off and they come in because they’re locals and take the jobs away from us that never had no forty-four dollars a month.” LOC
Franklin D. Roosevelt, Congress, and U.S. Foreign Policy, 1933–41

From 1933 to 1939, Congress pursued a largely isolationist foreign policy, particularly with respect to the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. The most emphatic manifestation of this stance was a series of neutrality acts passed between 1935 and 1937 that barred the sale of munitions or extension of loans to nations at war.

This was an area where Franklin D. Roosevelt had to tread carefully. Though he believed the war overseas would undoubtedly affect U.S. security and disliked having his foreign-policy options curtailed by the neutrality laws, the American people were strongly against getting involved in a European war, and he had promised them he would not send their sons to fight. There was solid support for the neutrality acts among Democrats in Congress, too. Not shy about exercising the presidential veto, FDR chose not to use it to block the neutrality laws.

When he did seek revisions that would allow the United States to help Britain and other nations resist the Nazis, FDR instead applied the power of persuasion, taking to the airways, talking to the press, making speeches, and meeting with members of Congress to explain why these moves were necessary and important.

After the outbreak of World War II in September 1939, FDR succeeded in pushing through an amendment to the 1937 Neutrality Act that repealed its arms embargo and allowed the United States to sell arms to Great Britain and France if they paid cash and transported the goods in their own ships. In March 1941, Congress passed a much broader aid program dubbed Lend-Lease. FDR’s own brainchild, it simply allowed the president to “lend or lease” war equipment to any nation he deemed vital to the defense of the United States.

During the same period, Congress also passed the nation’s first peacetime draft and approved the increased appropriations FDR had urged for buildup of America’s armed forces. FDR was preparing the nation for war, and though he felt time was of the essence, he was careful, in this life-or-death matter, not to outpace public opinion or overtax congressional support.
Franklin D. Roosevelt and Congress at War, 1941–45

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt no longer needed to convince either Congress or the American people that war was upon them. A joint session of Congress overwhelmingly supported FDR’s request for a declaration of war against Japan. Congress also supported the president’s request for additional military appropriations and granted him additional powers to create new war agencies, reorganize the executive branch, and enforce wartime regulations and controls.

But support for the war effort in Congress did not dislodge the conservative coalition that had formed in 1938, and in the years after FDR’s unprecedented election to a third term in 1940 and the midterm elections of 1942, opposition to his domestic-reform agenda held fast.

As a result, Congress terminated the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, the National Youth Administration, and the National Resources Planning Board in 1943. FDR managed to push through the G.I. Bill of Rights in June 1944, providing veterans with education and training, loan guarantees for homes and businesses, and unemployment insurance. But Congress rejected his call for a national service bill to enlist civilian labor in the war effort and his flirtation with national health insurance.

November 1944 saw FDR’s star seem to ascend once again. He was elected to an extraordinary fourth term, and the Democrats made gains in the House. Support for the war effort—and for his wartime leadership—also remained high, in part because of FDR’s willingness to involve Republican congressional leaders in the burgeoning effort to secure a lasting peace, by establishing the United Nations, among other measures. Sadly, though, FDR didn’t live to see these plans through. He died unexpectedly on April 12, 1945, just days before the San Francisco Conference convened to draw up the United Nations Charter, and only weeks before the war in Europe came to an end.
The Legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Leadership in Washington, DC

Though the way Franklin D. Roosevelt enlivened the presidency and changed its relations with Congress followed the example of his mentors Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, the mark he left on the office was very much his own. From FDR’s tenure on, it was very often the president who initiated legislation, frequently drawing on the expertise of the White House staff or members of the civil service to help craft legislation. Congress, meanwhile, became more of a reactive body, shaping and other times obstructing initiatives emanating from the executive branch. In the process, the White House and the office of the presidency took on more stature in the eyes of the public, becoming the central institution and the most salient symbol of the U.S. government.

This is not to say that Congress had become irrelevant. On the contrary, the many legislative achievements of the New Deal would not have been possible without the strong support and at times the initiative of key members of the House and Senate. Nor did the president become all-powerful, although some criticized FDR’s broadening of the presidential role as a reflection of his egotism. In fact, FDR faced considerable opposition to his reform efforts in Congress. This was particularly true among conservatives of his own party, who held many key committee chairmanships, were never very comfortable with the New Deal, and vehemently opposed much of his progressive agenda, especially with respect to matters of race.

The crisis of the Great Depression allowed him to pull together enough congressional support (including from liberal Republicans) to put in place programs and laws to mitigate the country’s economic woes and launch important reforms. But by the midpoint of his second term, the political landscape had shifted, and further major reforms were no longer possible. Ironically, it was members of his own party—the conservative Democrats—who were largely responsible for the shutdown of FDR’s reform agenda and the termination of the New Deal.

Nevertheless, FDR’s ability to give voice to the average American and to establish a host of enduring social policies, from Social Security to the minimum wage, left the American people with a new image of their central government. Previously only a distant regulator of economic and social affairs, the federal government—as represented by the president working with Congress—assumed the responsibility to support prosperity, mitigate the harshest effects of unfeathered capitalism, and conserve and develop the nation’s vast natural and cultural resources. In less than a decade, the U.S. government had become the primary guarantor of social and economic justice for its people.

A poster rallying voters to elect Franklin D. Roosevelt—"Our Friend"—to a fourth term in 1944. The longest-serving president in American history, FDR elevated the office itself, making the president both a symbol of America and, frequently, a source of major policy initiatives. The poster is by the artist Ben Shahn, for the political arm of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, a labor organization. Ben Shahn