In 1932 Americans faced a stark choice. They could vote to keep “the old order” in the White House, or they could choose Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “New Deal for the American people.”

FDR, the fifty-two-year-old governor of New York, argued that incumbent president Herbert Hoover’s policies had failed a nation plunged into despair by the Great Depression. FDR promised “bold, persistent experimentation” to unlock the paralyzed American economy and alleviate the people’s fear and suffering. Hoover’s policies of “Destruction, Delay, Despair and Doubt,” he insisted, were no way to run the nation.

Although most Americans expected Hoover to lose, tainted as he was by the country’s economic catastrophe, few anticipated the dramatic campaign that unfolded as the election season progressed. FDR broke with convention by flying to Chicago to accept the Democratic nomination in person. “Let it be from now on the task of our Party to break foolish traditions,” he told the cheering delegates. Defying tradition once again, he launched a national whistle-stop campaign, crisscrossing the nation, and delivered sixteen major speeches, each tied to a specific policy issue.

By election night, FDR had traveled roughly fifteen thousand miles. “Roosevelt the Robust” trounced the whisper campaign alleging his polio made him too weak to govern. Indeed, his dynamism emboldened voters. They wanted to believe in the hopeful words of FDR’s campaign song, “Happy Days Are Here Again.”

Voters understood that the election of 1932 represented a fork in the road. They could stay the course or insist that government respond more fully to the problems confronting the nation. Although Americans had only a general understanding of what the New Deal would entail, they voted overwhelmingly to give FDR and his program a chance.
Franklin D. Roosevelt used his 1930 campaign for reelection as governor of New York to test messages he planned to use against Herbert Hoover in a bid for the presidency. He won the state election by a landslide—a victory that convinced several party leaders and prominent journalists FDR would be the front-runner for the Democratic nomination in the 1932 presidential election.

Shortly after FDR won a second term as governor, New York Democratic Party Chair James Farley and Louis Howe, FDR’s indispensable and devoted aide, mapped out a presidential campaign strategy that would highlight FDR’s administrative experience and tout the relief policies he had introduced in New York. FDR would not campaign, they thought. He would govern his state, deliver a few speeches, and send surrogates out to the primaries to represent him. Farley would travel the nation recruiting delegates, and Howe would oversee strategy and manage the Friends of Roosevelt outreach network he had spent years developing. After months of preparation, the campaign officially began on January 23, 1932, when North Dakota Democrats entered FDR into their state presidential primary.

As FDR developed momentum in the primaries, the California publisher William Randolph Hearst urged House Speaker John Nance Garner of Texas to challenge him for the party nomination. Garner, loath to jeopardize his “tender majority of three” in the House, did not enter any primaries or campaign in any states. But Hearst made
sure his name appeared on the California ballot, and he won the state’s primary.

Another FDR rival for the nomination was Al Smith, his predecessor as New York governor, whom FDR had supported for president in 1924 and 1928. Smith had been put out that FDR failed to consult him while serving in Albany—“He has ignored me!” he told one journalist—and was disgusted to find his onetime protégé mounting a strong challenge to his nomination for president in a year when Democrats at last seemed likely to prevail. Smith stayed in New York, pouting to the press and plotting his political comeback.

As other favorite sons entered the race, FDR delivered a radio address from Albany calling for the federal government to go beyond measures to support failing banks and railroads and do something to help “the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid.” His rivals were caught off guard and fumbled their responses. Smith, who had left school at age twelve to work the fish markets of Lower Manhattan, could not control his fury. He accused FDR of pitting rich against poor. “This is no time for demagogues,” a red-faced Smith fumed at a major Democratic fund-raiser, the annual Jefferson Day Dinner. Reporters could not resist parodying his remarks as “the angry warrior speech,” a play on the moniker FDR had given Smith when nominating him in 1924: the Happy Warrior.

FDR kept his stride. “There are millions of people who cannot be helped by merely helping their employers,” he insisted. The country, he told graduates of Oglethorpe University, needed action. It was “common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.”

This demand for federal initiative was an effective rallying cry, but it did not win everyone in the party. Many northeastern progressives insisted that, as governor, FDR should remove the indicted, notoriously corrupt New York City mayor Jimmy Walker from office. FDR, not wanting to alienate the city’s powerful Tammany Hall machine, sidestepped the crisis and referred it to the state legislature. The journalist Walter Lippmann editorialized, “Franklin D. Roosevelt is no crusader. . . . He is a pleasant man who, without any important qualifications for the office, would very much like to be President.”

Thus, even though FDR had won the most primaries of any candidate and enjoyed a commanding lead in the delegate count, he had not convinced New England progressives to back him. He would have to win the nomination without them.

James Farley, Franklin D. Roosevelt’s 1932 campaign manager, at the White House in 1936. Farley, chairman of the New York State Democratic Committee, had already helped orchestrate FDR’s gubernatorial wins, and would go on to run his presidential reelection campaign in 1936. LOC
Securing the Nomination

When the Democrats gathered for their convention in the Chicago Stadium on June 27, 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt had three times as many delegates as former governor Al Smith, his nearest rival, but not enough delegates to win the nomination outright.

Nine other candidates—including John Nance Garner, the Texan Speaker of the House; Newton Baker, Woodrow Wilson’s secretary of war; and Virginia Governor Harry Byrd—hoped they could block FDR and emerge with the party’s nomination to campaign for the White House.

But FDR entered the convention with an impressive coalition. He had swept the conservative Democratic South (except for Garner’s Texas and Byrd’s Virginia) and enjoyed firm support in the West (apart from California, where publishing magnate William Randolph Hearst had successfully promoted Garner). FDR had even secured the support of progressive Republicans.

His weakness was in the Northeast. There, political bosses and leading progressives—persuaded by journalist Walter Lippmann’s and Smith’s characterizations of FDR as a lightweight—doubted FDR’s progressivism, backing Smith instead. The New York delegation was split between allies-turned-rivals FDR and Smith. Smith held a solid grasp on Massachusetts.

After the delegates finally cast their first ballot at 4:28 a.m. on June 29, FDR had 66 votes—104 short of what he needed to secure the nomination. They would vote twice more before adjourning, exhausted, at 9:15 a.m. FDR had picked up support, but he still needed eighty-eight more delegates to clinch the nomination. Campaign officials worked frantically throughout the day to sway delegates.

FDR’s team spent the next nine hours wooing Garner’s delegates, where its ripest opportunity lay. FDR supporter Joseph Kennedy called Hearst to say if he didn’t release the Garner delegates to FDR, Newton Baker, the former secretary of war whose internationalist views Hearst staunchly opposed, might get the nomination. A dispirited Hearst wired one of his reporters to tell Garner to “throw his votes to Roosevelt.” “Hell, I’d do anything to see the Democrats win one more election,” Garner responded. With Texas and California delegates added to the Roosevelt coalition, FDR won the nomination on the fourth ballot. It was, the journalist H. L. Mencken later wrote, “the most fateful convention in American history,” but “no one knew it at the time.”

Setting a precedent that candidates would follow without fail for generations to come, FDR decided not to stay in Albany to receive word of his nomination, as tradition dictated. Instead he would fly to Chicago to address the convention in person.
Flying to Chicago: A “New Deal” in Style and Substance

By sweeping into the convention hall to personally rally delegates, Franklin D. Roosevelt created a sense of immediacy, drama, and vigor around his candidacy. With air travel in its infancy, flying to Chicago seemed a dashing gesture that underscored FDR’s modern sensibilities. Not incidentally, it also displayed an energetic mobility, helping to dispel the image of FDR as a man weakened by polio. Finally, the move showed FDR’s readiness to break through dusty traditions in favor of frank talk and practical actions.

On July 2, 1932, he, his family, and key aides boarded a small American Airlines plane bound for Chicago. The nine-hour flight encountered such rough air that most passengers vomited, but FDR, in his element, exited the plane exuding confidence and joy.

A motorcade carried the group to the convention hall, crammed to capacity with FDR supporters (Smith’s supporters had left after his defeat). Gripping the bars of a steel stall attached to the podium, FDR gave a powerful speech, making sure the delegates understood why he had traveled so far to see them. He declared,

I have started out on the tasks that lie ahead by breaking the absurd traditions that the candidate should remain in professed ignorance of what has happened for weeks until he is formally notified of that event many weeks later.

My friends, may this be the symbol of my intention to be honest and to avoid all hypocrisy or sham, to avoid all silly shutting of the eyes to the truth in this campaign. You have nominated me and I know it, and I am here to thank you for the honor.

Then FDR turned to the country’s appallingly severe economic problems and how he planned to tackle them:

What do the people of America want more than anything else? To my mind, they want two things: work, with all the moral and spiritual values that go with it; and with work, a reasonable measure of security—security for themselves and for their wives and children. Work and security—these are more than words. They are more than facts. They are the spiritual values, the true goal toward which our efforts of reconstruction should lead. . . .

Our Republican leaders tell us economic laws—sacred, inviolable, unchangeable—cause panics which no one could prevent. But while they prate of economic laws, men and women are starving. We must lay hold of the fact that economic laws are not made by nature. They are made by human beings.

FDR proposed concrete actions to remedy the pain and despair: lower mortgage rates, prevent foreclosures, reduce farm surpluses, regulate the stock and bond markets, repeal Prohibition, cut the federal payroll by 25 percent, and provide relief for the needy unemployed.

“I pledge you,” FDR told the delegates, “I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people.”
Once Franklin D. Roosevelt had secured the nomination, his campaign team did not want him to launch a nationwide campaign and in particular urged him not to campaign in the West. The West was already solidly behind FDR. Key aides worried that a strenuous campaign would test his health and might encourage audiences to reconsider their support for his proposals.

FDR bristled. “I have a streak of Dutch stubbornness in me, and the Dutch is up this time,” he told his campaign manager, James Farley. “I’m going to campaign to the Pacific Coast and discuss every important issue of this campaign.”

Everywhere FDR went, he began his remarks by attacking President Herbert Hoover for not ending the Depression. Then he offered his audience a general impression of how he would help. Farmers in Topeka, Kansas, heard FDR declare that “this nation cannot endure if it is half boom and half broke” and that he had a “definite policy” grounded in “the planned use of the land.” In Salt Lake City, Utah, FDR argued that “individual railroads should be regarded as parts of a national transportation system” and that, with careful planning, such a system could be developed. He used his visit to Seattle, Washington, to call for reduced tariffs and his stop in Portland, Oregon, to champion hydroelectricity and public power. When critics called his policies radical, FDR retorted, “My policy is as radical as American liberty. My policy is as radical as the Constitution.”

By Election Day FDR had covered more miles more than any other presidential candidate before him. Journeying mainly in a Pullman sleeping car called the Pioneer, FDR visited major cities and stopped at small towns along his route to confer with local elected officials and court voters. He also took time away from the campaign to meet with handicapped children. “It’s a little difficult for me to stand on my feet too,” he told them.
Herbert Hoover Takes to the Stump

Herbert Hoover, unlike Franklin D. Roosevelt, did not plan to conduct a strenuous campaign. He thought a few well-timed, expertly delivered speeches would be enough to win him a second term. Hoover remained supremely confident in the actions he had taken to address the Depression and insisted that economic recovery lay just around the corner. At their convention in June, Republicans dubbed him “the stalwart American.”

Hoover was happy the Democrats had put up FDR as their candidate. He initially dismissed FDR as a “lightweight” whom he could easily defeat at the ballot box. When FDR began to attack Hoover’s record, the incumbent abandoned his laid-back approach. But his traditional campaign and hold-the-line message stood in vivid contrast to FDR’s embrace of change, and, as historian Frank Freidel has observed, “reinforced [Hoover’s] stature as the symbol of the old order.”

When FDR urged Americans to recognize their “interdependence” and the federal government’s potential to act for the common good, Hoover insisted that Americans must “strain [themselves] to the limit rather than lie down under a paternal government.” He accused FDR of promoting class warfare and of frightening investors. The New Deal, Hoover asserted, was a desperate ploy designed by “false prophets of a millennium” peddling “seductive but unworkable and disastrous theories of government.” “You cannot extend the mastery of government over the daily life of a people without somewhere making it a master of people’s souls and thoughts,” he warned. Most Americans rejected his argument.

Hoover’s defense of the status quo engendered intense bitterness among ideological and economic orthodoxies. Hoover jokes abounded. A popular one had Hoover asking to borrow a nickel to call a friend, only to have the Secret Service agent respond, “Here’s a dime. Go call both of them.” Another had Hoover’s kidnappers demanding $500,000 “or we will bring him back.” The dispossessed threw up shantytowns they dubbed “Hoovervilles.” Veterans stood at busy intersections blowing “Hoover whistles” that emitted hot air rather than screeching sounds. When people turned out their empty pockets, they called the flopping fabric “Hoover flags.”

As the campaign drew to a close, Hoover pleaded with Americans to see the danger they courted in supporting FDR. “This inchoate New Deal . . . would not only undermine and destroy our American system,” he said, it would “delay for months and years the possibility of recovery.” An overwhelming majority of American voters disagreed.
I. Becoming a Leader: FDR Before the Presidency

On November 8, 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected to the nation’s highest office in a landslide. Nearly 40 percent of voters cast a ballot for Hoover, but 57.4 percent went for FDR. No president since Andrew Jackson had won a higher percentage of the popular vote. The lopsided outcome was even more pronounced in the Electoral College: 472 votes for FDR, 59 votes for Herbert Hoover. FDR swept the South, the West, and most of the Northeast. Of the 114 American cities with populations over a hundred thousand, FDR won 99 and Herbert Hoover just 15.

African Americans, ever loyal to the party of Lincoln—and not yet persuaded to support the Democratic Party long associated with segregation—remained with Hoover. Despite their 50 percent unemployment rate, black voters cast two-thirds of their ballots for him. In 1936 they would shift their allegiance to the party of Roosevelt.

James Farley had managed an exemplary campaign. He had recruited local party chairs, made sure they had the materials they needed to promote FDR, and sent them morale-boosting letters signed in Farley’s trademark green ink. Louis Howe had produced reams of literature targeted to different constituencies and worked his contacts in the press to present an exceedingly positive image of FDR. Eleanor Roosevelt and her allies in the party’s Women’s Division had organized so effectively that almost 20 percent more women voted in 1932 than had cast ballots in 1928. Perhaps just as important, FDR, Farley, and Howe had done what no Democratic candidate had managed before: united opposing sides in the country’s conflict over alcohol, the “wet” Catholics of the Northeast and the “dry” Protestant Democrats of the West and the South.

FDR’s long coattails drew a host of other Democrats into office along with him. Thanks to Farley and Howe’s outreach, voters across the country put Democrats back in control of Congress, giving FDR the legislative support and popular mandate he needed to implement the New Deal.

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**Tallying the Votes**

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