

1 The changing political environment, 1933–45

► *What factors influenced and changed the political environment from 1933–45?*

Influences on the political landscape

During the Roosevelt years, four factors influenced the political environment and combined to change the role of President and government:

- the Great Depression
- the **New Deal**
- Roosevelt's ideas, activism and charisma
- the Second World War.

The influence of Roosevelt

Franklin Roosevelt had a great influence on the:

- role of the federal government in relation to the American economy and society
- nature, role and power of the American presidency
- Democratic Party
- post-war world and America's role in it.

From rugged individualism to New Deal ideas

Democratic Governor Franklin Roosevelt of New York State was unique among governors in introducing large-scale relief and public work programmes. As he said in a May 1932 presidential election campaign speech, 'The country needs and ... the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something.'

Roosevelt promised Americans a 'New Deal' and they got it. Although the conservatism of his three Republican predecessors has been exaggerated, the dramatic contrast between them and the Democrat Roosevelt was illustrated by the sheer quantity of New Deal legislation passed in President Roosevelt's first 100 days.

Roosevelt asked Congress for legislation to restore prosperity and faith in a devastated economy in which over 25 per cent of the workforce remained unemployed, some crops rotted in the field, 12 per cent of farmers had lost their land, many factories stood idle, thousands of banks had either failed or closed,

KEY TERM

New Deal Roosevelt's plan to get the USA out of the Depression; an unprecedented programme of federal aid to those most in need.



Franklin Delano Roosevelt

1882	Born into a wealthy family in New York State
1900-4	Studied law at Harvard
1905	Married distant cousin Eleanor Roosevelt
1910	Elected to the New York State Senate
1913-20	Assistant Secretary of the Navy
1928-33	Popular and effective Governor of New York State
1933-7	First presidential term dominated by economic depression
1937-41	Second presidential term dominated by the deteriorating international situation
1941-5	Third presidential term dominated by the Second World War
1945 April	Died a few weeks into his fourth term

and 'walk'. The American press respectfully ignored his disability throughout his political career and many Americans did not know the extent of their President's disability.

President Roosevelt used federal government power and expenditure to stimulate the economy during the Great Depression. The combination of his policies and wartime demand helped restore confidence and bring about economic recovery. Roosevelt then led the nation into and through the war but died on the verge of victory.

Historians invariably rate Roosevelt as one of the greatest American Presidents. His presidency was a turning point in American history: it revolutionised the role of the federal government and saw the United States become the world's leading power. He was the first and last US President to be elected to serve four terms. He left an enduring legacy in Social Security, the minimum wage, the regulation of banks, large-scale federal government intervention in the economy and society, and a US commitment to international leadership.

and thousands of people could not pay their mortgages. With exceptional speed and willingness, Congress passed legislation (see pages 71-2) in 1933 that:

- tried to solve the overproduction problem by paying farmers to produce less
- regulated banking and the stock exchange
- aimed to revitalise industry, create jobs and provide some direct relief for the unemployed.

In what became known as the 'Second New Deal', which began in 1935, the Social Security Act established the revolutionary principle of federal government responsibility for the provision of direct relief to the unemployed and the elderly.

The significance of the New Deal

The New Deal measures greatly increased the social and economic role of the federal government. They were due not to any long-standing 'big government' philosophy on Roosevelt's part but to the severity of the Great Depression and Roosevelt's flexible response to it. Roosevelt told New Dealer Raymond Moley that he was 'taking an enormous step away from the philosophy of ...



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laissez-faire ... If that philosophy hadn't proved to be bankrupt, Herbert Hoover would be sitting here right now'. Even Hoover had admitted that the era of *laissez-faire* was dead (see page 14), and now industrialisation, urbanisation, the Great Depression and Franklin Roosevelt seemed to have killed off rugged individualism.

Many contemporaries recognised that Roosevelt and the New Deal were changing the presidency and the federal government and challenging traditional economic ideas. Some businessmen and upper-class Americans resented Roosevelt's talk of redistributing wealth and hated 'that cripple in the White House'. Some feared that New Deal ideas opened the door to socialism, others considered him insufficiently radical and proposed more left-wing solutions, but the 60.8 per cent of voters who opted for him in 1936 obviously thought he had got it right.

The influence of Roosevelt's New Deal was great and long lasting. Under Roosevelt, the American government became a highly active participant in the nation's economic and social life. His New Deal programmes created a post-war political consensus: the 1944 Republican election platform supported the extension of the New Deal's Social Security measures (pensions for the elderly and unemployment benefits), while many businessmen accepted that the government should play a part in managing the US economy. After 1945, successive administrations continued to manage in varying degrees the economy and social policy and most voters expected them to do so. Roosevelt's New Deal had produced a 'semi-welfare state'. In Roosevelt's words, Americans had progressed from 'the liberty of the individual' (or rugged individualism) to 'the liberty of the community'. 'It's more than a New Deal,' said Interior Secretary Harold Ickes. 'It's a new world.'

A changing presidency

Harding and Coolidge had sought to demonstrate their ordinariness to the American public, as when Harding conducted the 1920 election campaign from his front porch and Coolidge dressed up as an Indian chief (see page 11). They were more ordinary Americans than the wealthy, upper-class Roosevelt, but he proved to be even more of a people's President.

Roosevelt was a highly visible President, whether on the campaign trail or on visits. Even when his health was deteriorating, his open-top limousine made a four-hour election campaign procession through New York City. Amidst pouring rain, an estimated 3 million spectators saw him giving his trademark cheery wave. He took care to ensure that the public would only see him either standing (the braces on his withered legs would be locked in place) or seated in an open car – apart from two special occasions. In 1936, he opened a new building at Howard University. Howard's president told him that Howard's black students were crippled by white society and would be inspired by seeing how their President had overcome adversity. Roosevelt allowed himself to be seen being

KEY TERM

Welfare state In its fullest form, a state that looks after its citizens 'from the cradle to the grave'.

The Democratic Party

The Great Depression and Roosevelt ensured that the Democratic Party dominated US politics for several decades. Roosevelt's 'New Deal' Democrat coalition consisted of the urban working classes, organised labour, black Northerners and Southern whites.

Why did Roosevelt's speeches impress Rosenman?

Although it was a campaign speech, it was pitched on a level far above the political battle. It expressed the President's hopes, philosophy and aspirations; it laid out a blueprint for the America of the future. As an example of what the President could do in preparing a speech under great pressure of time and circumstance it was unequalled.

His delivery in this speech was better than in any other speech I have ever heard him make. It is difficult to analyze the oratory of a speaker to see what it is that makes his delivery of speeches effective and moving. Over the years I watched Roosevelt with ever-growing wonderment and admiration as he made speeches of all kinds with exactly the right effect. There were the honey fireside chats, the stirring campaign speeches of attack, the argumentative and persuasive addresses to the Congress, the extemporaneous informal remarks on the rear platform of a train, at Thanksgiving dinner in Warm Springs, to a group of newspaper editors calling on him at the White House. Each speech seemed perfectly attuned to the audience and to the occasion.

An extract from Samuel Rosenman, Working with Roosevelt, Harper & Brothers, 1952, pages 242 and 249. Rosenman was a member of Roosevelt's speech-writing team.

SOURCE A

Roosevelt worked long, hard and successfully to create and sustain a good relationship with representatives of the press, with whom he was relaxed, humorous, friendly and frequently direct. He also established a special relationship with the public using the new medium of radio broadcasts. He was the first President to speak so directly, effectively and frequently to the nation. He used everyday language to explain his policies in his 'fireside chats'. His voice was authoritative but friendly and calmly reassuring – he projected his personality through the medium of radio. According to the *New York Times*, 'When millions of people can hear the President speak to them directly in their own homes, we get a new meaning for the old phrase about a public man's "going to the country".' When Roosevelt delivered an important foreign policy speech at 9 p.m. on 29 December 1940, all public places such as movie theatres and restaurants emptied because the people wanted to hear him, and a record 75 per cent of Americans listened to or read his words. His explanatory addresses directly to the people 'changed the nature of Presidential leadership forever', according to biographer Jean Edward Smith (2007).

Roosevelt's speeches to live audiences were equally effective. He worked closely with a team of speechwriters, but his input was great and he always wrote the final drafts himself. Roosevelt presented his vision of the American Dream in a speech in Cleveland in 1940, which long-serving speechwriter Samuel Rosenman considered his finest (see Sources A and B).

SOURCE B

Lifted from his car and walking slowly and painfully toward the platform. In a 1944 visit to a military hospital, he had his Secret Service man push him in his wheelchair through wards where the patients had lost one or both legs.

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SOURCE B

From President Roosevelt's speech in Cleveland in November 1940. Accessed at www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=15893

I see an America ...

where there is no endless chain of poverty from generation to generation, where impoverished farmers and farm hands do not become homeless wanderers, where monopoly does not make youth a beggar for a job ...

[where the environment is] protected as the rightful heritage of all the people ...

where small business really has a chance to flourish and grow ...

of great cultural and educational opportunity for all its people ...

where the income from the land shall be implemented and protected by a Government determined to guarantee to those who hoe it a fair share in the national income ...

where the wheels of trade and private industry continue to turn to make the goods for America ...

with peace in the ranks of labor ...

An America where the workers are really free. Where the dignity and security of the working man and woman are guaranteed by their own strength and fortified by the safeguards of law ...

where those who have reached the evening of life shall live out their years in peace and security. Where pensions and insurance for these aged shall be given as a matter of right to those who through a long life of labor have served their families and their nation as well ...

devoted to our freedom – unified by tolerance and by religious faith – people consecrated to peace, people ... secure and unafraid.

The relationship Roosevelt created with many Americans could be seen in the White House mailroom, which required a single worker under President Hoover but 70 under Roosevelt. Roosevelt received a daily average of over 4000 letters from the people. Some were hostile, but most were respectful and grateful and many were affectionate.

When Roosevelt died, millions lined the railroad tracks as his coffin was transported from his retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia, to his birthplace at Hyde Park in New York State. 'I never really understood until then how much the people loved him', Eleanor Roosevelt said later. A service man in the Philippines noticed how he and his group could not observe the conventional military rituals of mourning: 'Our feelings were too strong, and he was – there's no getting away from it – "the father of us all".'

Judging from this speech, what were the characteristics of Roosevelt's 'American Dream'?



Roosevelt was conscious of potential dangers in the growing power of the federal government. In 1934, he opposed total federal government control over the social insurance system that would be introduced in the Social Security Act: 'Oh no, we've got to leave all that we can to the states. All the power should not be in the hands of the federal government. Look – just think what would happen if all the power were concentrated here and HUEY LONG [the populist, demagogic Governor of Louisiana] became president.' Nevertheless, some contemporaries feared Roosevelt sought and acquired too much power, including early New Dealer Raymond Moley, who deserted Roosevelt in 1935. Right-wingers frequently branded Roosevelt a would-be dictator and in 1935 the

sharply with the Republican era of 1921–33. Roosevelt had precedents in the Progressive Era (see page 8) but contrasted a role that had expanded the President's role in the promotion of a legislative agenda, confirm and expand the President's role in the promotion of a legislative agenda, of legislation that delegated vast new powers to the executive. This served to generate economic recovery. He successfully sought an exceptional amount for unprecedented power and money for federal government programmes to The economic crisis ensured that Roosevelt obtained congressional agreement predecessors.

expectations in a way that it had not been under Roosevelt's three Republican predecessors. In his 1933 Inaugural Address, Roosevelt recognised how crisis and war greatly increased presidential power when he said that if Congress failed to act on the economy, 'I shall ask Congress for the one remaining instrument to meet the crisis – broad Executive power to wage war against the emergency, as great as the power that would be given to me if we were in fact invaded by a foreign foe.' The economic crisis and the Second World War combined to make the presidency the centre of political life and the focus of the public's hopes and expectations in a way that it had not been under Roosevelt's three Republican predecessors.

A more powerful President

In Roosevelt's exceptional connection with a majority of Americans, in his management and promotion of the change from rugged individualism to New Deal ideas, and in his unprecedented legislative and policy initiatives that dramatically expanded the federal government, Roosevelt greatly changed the political landscape and the presidency.

An example of a grateful letter to President Roosevelt

Dear Mr President,
This is just to tell you everything is all right now. The man you sent found our house all right and we went down the bank with him and the mortgage can go on awhile longer. You remember I wrote you about losing the furniture too. Well, your man got it back for us. I never heard of a President like you, Mr Roosevelt. Mrs — and I are old folks and don't amount to much, but we are joined with those millions of others in praying for you every night.
God bless you, Mr Roosevelt.

Roosevelt

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conservative Supreme Court made what seemed to be a concerted attack on the constitutionality of the New Deal, notably in the 'sick chicken' case.

When the Roosevelt administration tried to halt a company's sale of chickens unfit for human consumption, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the sellers on the grounds that Congress had unconstitutionally delegated its inalienable legislative authority to the NRA (see page 72) and that such matters were the concern of the state rather than the federal government. Roosevelt resented nine unelected judges (none of whom he had appointed) blocking the policies of the elected government, asking, 'Does this decision mean that the United States Government has no control over any national economic problems?' He therefore proposed a Judiciary Reform Bill under which Supreme Court justices would retire at 70 and their number could be increased to 15. This attempt to 'pack' the Supreme Court in 1936 worried many in Congress and the electorate and there was more talk of attempted dictatorship. Congress rejected the bill but the Supreme Court became more cooperative ('a switch in time saves nine', said one wit) and recognised the government's right to manage the economy. Roosevelt did tend to ignore constitutionality and the democratic process when convinced that the nation needed it. This can be seen in the Supreme Court crisis and also in his foreign policy, through which he led America into the Second World War.

Reasons for continued isolationism

Roosevelt had been a Wilsonian internationalist (see page 16) before the Great Depression, but his 1933 inaugural address made clear that his priority was 'a sound national economy ... First things first'. While Japan, Germany and Italy became increasingly aggressive and expansionist, most Americans still remained isolationist because:

- The United States had historically avoided entangling alliances.
- German-Americans and Italian-Americans were reluctant to criticise their ancestral homelands.
- Many Americans were exasperated by British and French refusals to pay war debts and considered all Europeans equally bad.
- Historians and journalists fuelled popular isolationism when they depicted an innocent America tricked by British propaganda into the First World War. Some writers blamed greedy bankers and armaments manufacturers for the war, a 'merchants of death' theory popularised by the Senate investigatory committee headed by Gerald Nye of North Dakota during 1934–6 and convincing to many in the anti-business atmosphere of the Great Depression.
- Most importantly, Americans were preoccupied with their economic problems. They lost much of their national self-confidence in the Great Depression, which rid them of any Wilsonian illusions that the United States could make the world a better place.