

WOMEN DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION - Adapted from rooseveltinstitute.org

The New Deal laid the groundwork for many of the later gains made by women, but as was the case in the 1960s, 70s and 80s, the task of securing those rights was not easy and did come without a struggle. The principal advocate for women's economic and social rights within the context of the New Deal was FDR's wife Eleanor Roosevelt. From the thousands of letters that poured across her desk from ordinary Americans, ER knew that women too were suffering as a consequence of Great Depression. This was especially true of working women. It is estimated that more than 2 million women were unemployed at the start of 1933, many of whom represented the sole support for their families. Thanks to the traditional view of a "worker" as a white male breadwinner, however, these women went largely unrecognized, not only by government officials, but also by the public at large.



ER was determined to change this and from the start of the Roosevelt Administration, she began to lobby those in charge of the federal employment relief programs to make sure that opportunities for work were made available to women. As a consequence of her efforts, FDR's relief czar, Harry Hopkins, not only agreed to create a special woman's division within the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (the first major New Deal relief program and the predecessor to the later CWA and WPA), but also to appoint a woman to head it. Hopkins asked Ellen Woodward to do so. Under her direction, the whole approach to the problem of unemployed women was completely revamped. Woodward refused to tolerate that particular part-time approach that had previously been used by both state and federal officials within the FERA structure to deal with the needs of unemployed women. With Hopkins' backing, each state was now required to appoint a qualified woman to devote herself full-time to the woman's program.

Not content with this move alone, ER also hosted a special "White House Conference on the Emergency Needs of Women" in November 1933 to draw further attention to the plight of working women in the midst of the Depression. Still, progress was slow. Only 7% of the jobs created by the FERA-backed Civilian Works Administration went to women, and roughly 25% of the National Recovery Administration's wage codes set minimum wages for women at a rate lower than men for the same work. Fortunately, the employment benefits extended to women improved dramatically with the establishment of the Works Projects Administration (WPA) in 1935. Also headed by Hopkins, with Ellen Woodward once again leading the women's division, the WPA employed 460,000 women at its peak in 1936.

As was the case with male workers, women also benefited from the major reforms of the New Deal, such as the Fair Labor Relations Act (which guaranteed workers rights to organize and led to more than 800,000 women joining unions by the end of the 1930s) and the Fair Labor Standards Act, which set maximum hour and minimum wages, although some major categories of women's employment, such as domestic workers and retail clerks, were left outside the reach of the law.

These gains, though somewhat modest within the overall scope of the New Deal relief, established the model that the troubles of working women must be taken into consideration in any state or national effort to provide relief to the unemployed. Equally important, the opportunities provided by the New Deal for professional women such as Ellen Woodward to work in the upper echelons of the federal government was also unprecedented. Indeed, the New Deal's record in placing women in positions of responsibility within government — which includes, among others, Frances Perkins, Secretary of Labor, the first female cabinet minister in American history; Josephine Roche, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury; Hilda Smith, the Director of Workers Education within the WPA; Clara Beyer, Associate Director of the Division of Labor Standards; and Mary McLeod Bethune as head of the Division of Negro Affairs in the National Youth Administration — would not be matched again until the 1960s.

Thanks to the efforts of Eleanor Roosevelt and others, then, the New Deal-though not perfect — broke new ground for women in America.

AFRICAN AMERICANS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION - Adapted from rooseveltinstitute.org

What impact, if any, did the New Deal had on the movement to secure equal rights for Blacks during the difficult years of the 1930s and beyond?

Judged from the standards of today, of course, there is much we can criticize about the New Deal/Roosevelt era. It did not bring to an end the tremendous injustices that African Americans had to suffer on a day-to-day basis. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) offered white landowners cash for leaving their fields fallow, which they happily accepted; they, however, did not pass on their government checks to the black sharecroppers and tenant farmers who actually worked the land. And some of its activities, such as the work of the Federal Housing Administration, served to build rather than break down the walls of segregation that separated black from white in Jim Crow America. Yet as educator Mary McLeod Bethune once noted, the Roosevelt era represented “the first time in their history” that African Americans felt that they could communicate their grievances to their government with the “expectancy of sympathetic understanding and interpretation.” Indeed, it was during the New Deal, that the silent, invisible hand of racism was fully exposed as a national issue; as a problem that at the very least needed to be recognized; as something the country could no longer pretend did not exist.

This shift in attitude, as Harvard Sitkoff, the noted historian of the African American experience in the New Deal observes, helped propel the issue of race relations onto the national stage and usher in a new political climate in which “Afro-Americans and their allies could begin to struggle with some expectation of success.” In short, the New Deal, and the symbolic support given to the cause of civil rights by both Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt gave the African American community hope; the chance to dream of a better future, no matter how difficult the struggle might be along the way.



It is also important to recognize that this hope was not merely based on empty promises of change, but on the actual words and deeds spoken by Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt and taken by the federal government at a time when racism was deeply seared into the American psyche. With respect to the critical issue of employment, for example, by 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was employing approximately 350,000 African Americans annually, about 15% of its total workforce. In the Civilian Conservation Corps, the percentage of blacks who took part climbed from roughly 3% at its outset in 1933 to over 11% by the close of 1938 with a total of more than 350,000 having been enrolled in the CCC by the time the program was shut down in 1942. The National Youth Administration, under the direction of Aubrey Williams, hired more black administrators than any other New Deal agency; employed African American supervisors to oversee the work the agency was doing on behalf of black youth for each state in the south; and assisted more than 300,000 African American youth during the Depression. In 1934, the Public Works Administration (PWA) inserted a clause in all government construction contracts that established a quota for the hiring of black laborers based on the 1930 labor census and as a consequence a significant number of blacks received skilled employment on PWA projects.

African Americans also benefited from the Federal Music Project, which funded performances of black composers; from the Federal Theatre and Writing Projects, which hired and featured the work of hundreds of African American artists; and from the New Deal’s educational programs, which taught over 1 million illiterate blacks to read and write and which increased the number of African American children attending primary school.

As the leader of a political party that was heavily represented in Congress by racist Southern Democrats who supported segregation and even opposed the adoption of a federal anti-lynching law as an infringement of state’s rights, FDR had to choose his battles carefully and at times appears fearful in the face of racial injustice—especially when viewed from today. But this is the President who appointed a far greater number of blacks to positions of responsibility within his government than any of his predecessors, so much so in fact that this group became known as the “Black Cabinet” or “Black Brain Trust” in the press.

FDR was also the first president to appoint an African American as a federal judge; to promote a black man to the rank of Brigadier General in the Army; and, incredible as it might seem, the first president to publicly call lynching murder — “a vile form of collective murder”—which W.E.B. Dubois applauded as something that

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sadly was long overdue. Overall FDR's administration tripled the number of African Americans working for the federal government, including thousands of black engineers, architects, lawyers, librarians, office managers, and other professionals, and under his leadership, and with the strong support of Eleanor Roosevelt, the Democrats included the first specific African American plank in the party platform at the 1936 convention.

The New Deal was not perfect. It could not and did not eliminate segregation, or the destructive discrimination in employment, wages, and working condition that plagued so many African Americans during the difficult years of the 1930s. Moreover, in spite of the best efforts of federal officials like Harry Hopkins to forbid discriminatory practices among neighborhood relief agencies, such practices often continued at the local level, especially in the South. But in spite of these and other shortcomings, the willingness of the Roosevelt Administration to recognize the existence of a racial problem in American and to take steps at the federal level to ameliorate that problem, was, as Sitkoff notes, unprecedented. It made it clear that the federal government had a responsibility to ensure the civil rights of all Americans were protected; rendered civil rights a core part of the liberal agenda; and inspired a generation of African American leaders to continue to pressure not only the federal government, but also the federal courts, to strike down the laws that underpinned the widespread racial injustice that African Americans had endured since the promise of reconstruction.

W.E.B. Du Bois concluded that Roosevelt "gave the American Negro a kind of recognition in political life which the Negro had never before received."



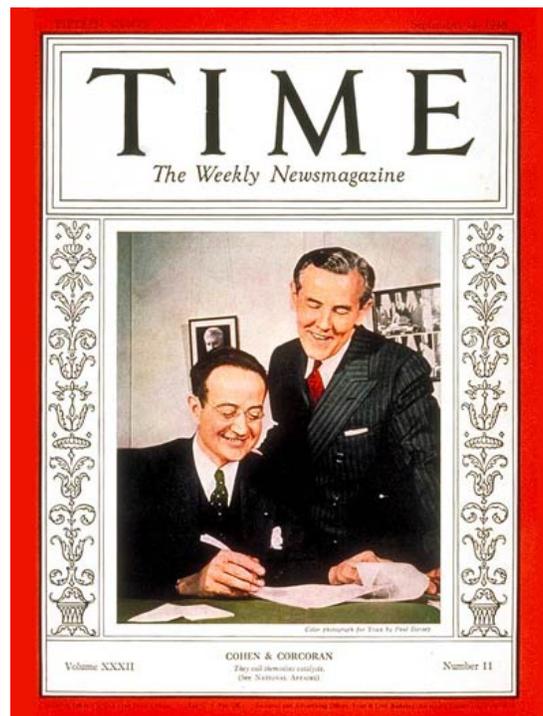
IMMIGRANTS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION - Adapted from millercenter.org

Between 1900 and 1930, the number of persons of Mexican descent living in the American southwest jumped from 375,000 to well over 1.1 million. Mexicans and Mexican-Americans found employment, as well as back-breaking and low-paying work, on large farms. The Great Depression, however, reduced the need for farm labor and caused unemployment among Mexicans living in the United States and Mexican-Americans to soar. At the behest of politicians and community leaders in the southwest looking to solve the region's unemployment problem, the U.S. government forcibly sent nearly 400,000 Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (some of them citizens) to Mexico. Those Mexican and Mexican Americans who remained in the United States faced grinding poverty and little help from the New Deal, which too often failed to help agricultural workers and people of color.

Although Congress passed a series of immigration laws in the 1920s which essentially halted the great migration of European immigrants since the last decades of the nineteenth century, recent immigrants continued to play an important role in American political, economic, and social life. The Great Depression hit recent immigrants very hard. They often worked in the low-paying industrial jobs that disappeared during the economic crisis. The ethnic communities that sustained immigrants as they adapted to life in the United States suffered too, as local businesses—from banks to tailors to groceries—failed.

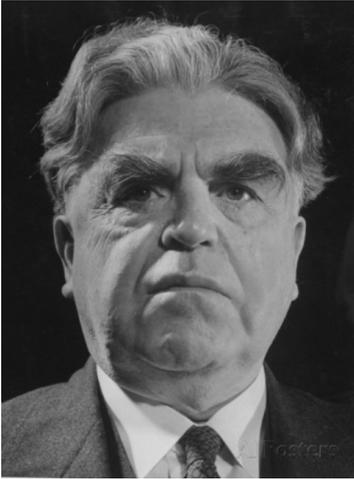
Starting with the 1928 election, the Democratic Party began to win the votes of recent immigrants, in large part because candidate Al Smith rejected prohibition and displayed a sensitivity to life in urban American, where immigrants most often lived. FDR built upon Smith's gains in the 1932 general election. The New Deal especially energized recent immigrants and brought them into the Democratic Party. Roosevelt appointed Jews and Catholics to important positions in his administration, heartening immigrant newcomers who reveled in the appointment of their co-religionists. So great a departure was Roosevelt's attitude from that of previous Presidents, whose appointments were largely restricted to white, northern European, Protestant men, that *Time Magazine* featured on the cover of one of its issues in 1935 two of his advisers, Thomas Corcoran (an Irish Catholic) and Benjamin Cohen (a Jew).

Most important to the party's success, however, was the emotional attachment recent immigrants felt toward FDR. They believed that he was *their* President and saw him a father-figure who watched after their interests. It was not unusual in the 1930s for FDR's picture to hang in a prominent place in a recent immigrant's home or business. These new Americans joined the Democratic party, and they and their children would vote Democratic for the next generation.



LABORERS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION - Adapted from millercenter.org

Between 1933 and 1941, union membership grew from less than 3 million workers to 10 million workers, a number which accounted for nearly thirty percent of all American workers. This fantastic growth resulted largely from changes in American politics and economics wrought by the Great Depression and the New Deal. The passage of the NIRA in 1933, with its "Section 7a" that gave workers the rights to organize and bargain collectively, accelerated the growth of union membership. After the Supreme Court invalidated the NIRA in 1935, Congress passed the Wagner Act, which strengthened labor's rights in relation to management, and gave real enforcement powers to the National Labor Relations Board. Workers and unions now had tangible evidence that the American government stood behind them.



When Roosevelt came to power, almost no factory worker in America belonged to a union. In no other developed country in the Western world was that true. But during the FDR years, a new labor coalition, the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), unionized the steel, automobile, textile, and other large industries. The CIO, headed by John L. Lewis, chief of the United Mine Workers, welcomed assembly line laborers, who often came from religious and ethnic minorities; in contrast, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) was interested primarily in craft workers, such as carpenters with northern European backgrounds. When in 1937, the auto workers launched sit-down strikes, Roosevelt refused to sanction the use of force to dislodge them. As a result, General Motors and other firms were compelled to recognize these new unions. Not until World War II, though, did Henry Ford and other stubborn employers yield.

African-American workers increasingly joined unions to protect their employment rights as well. One of the most powerful of such organizations was the Sleeping Car Porters' Union, a group of railroad-passenger attendants that was almost completely composed of African-Americans. Led by the tireless, charismatic A. Philip Randolph (1889-1979), the union languished for years until Roosevelt's legislation made it legally viable. It was the first African-American union to be allowed into the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1935, the Porters' Union forced a powerfully anti-union company, the makers and operators of Pullman passenger cars, to sit at the bargaining table with the union's members. After two long years of struggle, Pullman agreed to terms, a milestone event in American civil rights history.



NATIVE AMERICANS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION - Adapted from the Digital History online textbook

The so-called "Indian New Deal" was one of the only bright spots in the Roosevelt administration's treatment of minorities. In the late 19th century, American Indian policy had begun to place a growing emphasis on erasing a distinctive Native American identity. In 1871, Congress ended the practice of treating tribes as sovereign [independent] nations in an attempt to weaken the authority of tribal leaders. An effort was also made to undermine older systems of tribal justice. Accordingly, Congress created a Court of Indian Offenses in 1882 to prosecute Indians who violated government laws and rules. Indian schools took Indian children away from their families and tribes and sought to strip them of their tribal heritage. School children were required to trim their hair and to speak English and were prohibited from practicing Indian religions.

The 1887 Dawes Act was the result of these policies. The act allocated reservation lands to individual Indians. The purpose of the act was to encourage Indians to become farmers; however, the plots were too small to support a family or to raise livestock. In the areas where Indians did not settle, white settlers were given land. This broke up tribes and families, leading to further destruction of Native American culture. Government policies reduced Indian-owned lands from 155 million acres to just 48 million acres in 1934.

When Roosevelt became president in 1933, he appointed a leading reformer, John Collier, as commissioner of Indian affairs. At Collier's request, Congress created the Indian Emergency Conservation Program (IECP), a CCC-type project for the reservations which employed more than 85,000 Indians. Collier also made certain that the PWA, WPA, CCC, and NYA hired Native Americans.

Collier had long been an opponent of the 50-year-old government allotment program which partitioned and distributed tribal lands. In 1934, he persuaded Congress to pass the Indian Reorganization Act. The act terminated the allotment program of the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887; provided funds for tribes to purchase new land; offered government recognition of tribal constitutions; and repealed prohibitions on Native American languages and customs. That same year, federal grants were provided to local school districts, hospitals, and social welfare agencies to assist Native Americans.

