A "Great Cause for Better Citizens"? Attitudes Towards the New Deal

In this activity you will read letters from ordinary people to government leaders in the Roosevelt Administration. Then you interpret the range of attitudes about the changing role of the federal government during the New Deal.

Objectives

1. Students will analyze letters from the 1930s to identify the impact of the New Deal on the lives of ordinary people.
2. Students will interpret people's attitudes towards the New Deal and changes it caused in the role of the federal government.

Instructions

1. **Step 1:** Discussion: Describe the reasons why someone might write to the president or another elected official. Do you think people write to criticize, to praise, or both? Do you think the letters matter to elected officials? Do you think it matters when ordinary people write to officials?
   a. During the New Deal, millions of ordinary people wrote to President Roosevelt and members of his administration to tell him their hopes and concerns about the New Deal. These letters are a remarkable window into the lives of ordinary people and their views on the changing role of the government during the New Deal.

2. **Step 2:** You will be working in groups to analyze letters that ordinary people wrote to the government about their views on the New Deal. Each group a set of 4 to 6 letters and a graphic organizer. You should work in your groups to read the letters and complete the graphic organizer.

Homework (or GTS in class if time): Based on these letters, how was the New Deal affecting people's attitudes towards the federal government?

Historical Context

The New Deal was a turning point in the role of the federal government in the everyday lives of ordinary people. The relief programs of the New Deal altered the social contract, giving the federal government a much greater hand in providing for the basic needs of its citizens. Consequently New Deal programs provided, for the first time, direct relief in the form of payments, food, household supplies, and jobs. The New Deal also entailed a great deal of protections for consumers (especially in the security of bank deposits) and workers. The majority of Americans were extremely grateful for the changes in the federal government; some even demanded more radical changes. However, some feared that the New Deal would make people too dependent on the government; others called it socialism outright.

No matter what their views, however, Americans wrote to President Roosevelt and other members of his government to tell him how they felt. During his presidency the White House (alone!) received around 8,000 letters a day, compared with about 800 a day during the Hoover Administration. Roosevelt worked hard to cultivate a personal bond between himself and the voters through his Fireside Chats. During these radio broadcasts, which were announced with great fanfare and drew millions of listeners, Roosevelt explained in everyday language the goals and workings of his various New Deal programs. The president encouraged his listeners to write to him and their other elected officials to tell what they thought of the programs. In this way he built a strong constituency for his agenda.
## Attitudes About the New Deal

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The Letters: What do you know about the writer? When was it written?</th>
<th>What New Deal program(s) does the letter mention?</th>
<th>According to the author, what impact is government relief having on ordinary people? Note the words or phrases that support your conclusions.</th>
<th>How does the letter writer feel about the changes caused by the New Deal? Note the words or phrases that support your conclusions.</th>
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A Citizen Sees Socialism and Communism in the New Deal

Since the 19th century, some Americans had feared that socialism or communism would upset America's capitalist system and threaten American liberty. These fears had been especially strong since the Red Scare following World War I. The rise of Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, and Tojo in the 1920s and 1930s added new worries about the threat of fascism. This letter was reproduced with all of the author's original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

Hornell, New York
March 7, 1934

My Dear Senator:

It seems very apparent to me that the Administration at Washington is accelerating it's pace towards socialism and communism...

Everyone is sympathetic to the cause of creating more jobs and better wages for labor; but, a program continually promoting labor troubles, higher wages, shorter hours, and less profits for business, would seem to me to be leading us fast to a condition where the Government must more and more expand it's relief activities, and will lead in the end to disaster to all classes.

I believe that every citizen is entitled to know the policy of the Government, and I am so confused that I wish you would write me and advise me whether it is the policy of this Administration, of which you are a very important part, to further discourage business enterprise, and eventually set up a program which eliminates private industry and effort, and replaces it with Government control of industry and labor,—call it what you will: socialism, fascism, or communism, or by any other name.

I am not addicted to annoying public office holders with correspondence, but if there are any private rights left in this country, then I would appreciate an early reply to this letter, so that I may take such action as is still possible, to protect myself and family.

With kindest personal regards,

Yours truly,
W.L.C. [male]

WLC:JFE
U.S. Senator Robert F. Wagner
Senate Building
Washington, D.C.

An African American Describes Why New Deal Relief Is Not Reaching the Black Community

Between 1933 and 1935, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration gave the states $3.1 billion to distribute directly to the poor in the form of food, blankets, and construction projects to provide employment. Though the funds were from the federal government, local committees decided how and to whom to distribute funds and supplies. This letter is from someone who was not included in the distribution of relief. This letter was reproduced with all of the author’s original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

Reidsville, Ga. Oct 19th 1935

Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt.
President of U.S.
Washington D.C.

Dear Mr. President

Would you please direct the people in charge of the relief work in Georgia to issue the provisions + other supplies to our suffering colored people. I am sorry to worry you with this Mr. President but hard as it is to believe the relief officials here are using up most every thing that you send for them self + their friends. they give out the relief supplies here on Wednesday of this week and give us black folks, each one, nothing but a few cans of pickle meet and to white folks they give blankets, bolts of cloth and things like that. I dont want to take to much of your time Mr president but will give you just one example of how the relief is work down here the witto Nancy Hendrics own lands, stock holder in the Bank in this town and she is being supplied with Blankets cloth and gets a supply of cans goods regular this is only one case but I could tell you many.

Please help us mr President because we cant help our self and we know you is the president and a good Christian man we is praying for you. Yours truly cant sign my name Mr. President they will beat me up and run me away from here and this is my home.

Workers Ask for the Continuation of the W.P.A.

Shortly before this letter was written, W.P.A. rolls showed that approximately 3,400,000 people were employed through the program. This letter was reproduced with all of the author’s original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

President Roosevelt:

Please continue this W.P.A. program. It makes us feel like an American citizen to earn our own living. Being on the dole or relief roll makes us lazy and the funds are not enough to live decent on. We are thankful for what we receive though.

So we as W.P.A. workers in Battle Creek Michigan, appeal to you as our Great Leader to continue this great cause for Better citizens in Battle Creek Michigan.

Your Faithful,
W.P.A. workers of Battle Creek

Battle Creek Mich.
April 5, 1936

The Works Progress Administration was created in 1935. It employed millions of people to build bridges, schools, dams, roads, airports, civic buildings and other improvement projects.

Dole: an informal term to refer to direct relief handouts

A Clergyman Encourages a Bolder New Deal

In September 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a letter to clergymen across the United States, asking them whether conditions in their communities had improved since the start of the New Deal. He was particularly interested in people’s thoughts on Social Security, the new program passed in August 1935 to provide guaranteed payments for the elderly, the unemployed, and the disabled. This was one of over 100,000 responses he received. This letter was reproduced with all of the author’s original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

Our Honored President:

Your kind letter to me as a clergyman prompts me to record the following reactions:

The people I represent generally are looking at your Social Security Program as a step in the direction of progress....

The relief situation is deplorable—the standards are inadequate to the point of desperation. Little consideration is being shown the victims of the depression.

The Public Works Program has hardly reached the people of Chicago. We hardly know there is one. We hear of large appropriations—delay has given the people the feeling of being abandoned. The announced standards of wages for these projects are far too low. Abandonment of the housing projects took away what little evidence we had that the federal government was going to do something for the people.

Generally our criticism is that your administration had not gone far enough. The bold announcement in your inaugural address gave us hope that there would be a divorce between your administration and the elements that had been running the country to the dogs. We are still hoping.

Assuring you that we will join you in every movement for the good of our country.

Sincerely yours,
Armand Guerrero, Minister
Arnold Memorial Methodist Episcopal Church
Chicago, IL
October 11, 1935

A Citizen Objects to New Deal Relief Programs

This letter was written to Harry Hopkins, the head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration. Between 1933 and 1935, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration gave the states $3.1 billion to distribute directly to the poor in the form of food, blankets, and construction projects to provide employment. This letter was reproduced with all of the author's original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

Mr. Harrl L. Hopkins
Federal Emergency Relief Administration
Washington, D.C.

Dear Sir:
It seems worth while to call your attention to what is going on in near by Hoboken relative to “relief”…True relief is approved by the people of the USA but merely making loafers out of individuals who don’t want to work is definitely to the detriment of the country and is disasterous to the taxpayers of the country. If the situation as it now exists is not soon changed the voters of the country will give the present administration a thorough cleanout next November.

Yours truly,
[Signature illegible]

New York City
May 25th 1936

Relief: any aid given to the poor or unemployed, including jobs, food, clothing, or money

Loafers: an informal term that refers to lazy people, from the verb to loaf, which means to lay around

Detriment: harm, damage, disadvantage

Administration: the executive branch of the U.S. government headed by the president

A Clergyman Expresses Concern about the New Deal

In September 1935, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent a letter to clergymen across the United States, asking them whether conditions in their communities had improved since the start of the New Deal. This was one of over 100,000 responses he received. This letter was reproduced with all of the author’s original spelling, syntax, and grammar.

Honorable and Dear Sir:

... Since you ask for a statement of conditions in our community, and how we feel the government can better serve the people, I shall answer frankly, and to the best of my ability.

First of all, the care of the indigent aged and crippled children and those unemployed through no fault of their own, is a most worthy objective... There is already appearing and growing stronger a wide-spread tendency to depend upon the government, which where it appears tends to replace the older American spirit of independence. This may be unavoidable, but in any case it is a sign of decadence and most alarming. It goes along with the failure of personal initiative.

Secondly, most of us feel that government spending, while necessary during the past few years, has reached a point where it is creating a mountainous debt which future tax-payers will have to shoulder... The budget, we believe, should be balanced...

Thirdly, there seems to have been created, as a result of necessary relief, a large group of people who had much rather "get along" on what they receive from the dole, than to perform much-needed (but possibly more disagreeable) tasks for which they would receive remuneration...

Personally, I believe any further concentration of power in the central government is undesirable and menacing to the hard-won liberties of democracy...

With this, we are happy to note an improvement of economic conditions in this city. What I do not note, is an improvement of moral fibre...

Respectfully yours,
Rev. Fenimore E. Cooper, Rector
All Saints’ Church
South Salina Street at McLennan Avenue
Syracuse, NY
September 26, 1935

July 3, 1934

My dear Mr. President:—

Thank you many times for your cheerful message over the Radio. My family and I answered each of your questions as they were asked, in the affirmative, some in the negative. “Are you better off than last year” Yes, decidedly. “Are your debts less burdensome” Yes, Yes, thanks to your H.O.L.C.—Heretofor only the wealthy could hope to receive favors from our Government, but now even the “forgotten man” is remembered. “Is your bank account more secure?” Absolutely! “Is your faith in your future more firmly grounded?” Yes.

And now the negatives.

“Have you lost any rights of freedom of action or choice?” None whatsoever, but I have gained some greater freedom under the New Deal—But let the Government continue to appoint and manage The [New] Dealers, and not listen to the clammering of the Old Crowd…

Sincerely,
John Pauer
Sacramento, Calif.
