



ANALYSING THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND PRESIDENT ROOSEVELT'S NEW DEAL

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Research Question:

To what extent was political expediency the key reason for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's formulation of The New Deal of 1933 - 39?

1.0 Introduction

The Great Depression, stemming from the Wall Street Crash of 1929, forced the people of The United States into a period of poverty, unemployment, and despair. This intensified the urgency for solutions to control the nationwide damage and change the political climate, which constituted of public distaste toward the Republican President, Herbert Hoover, due to his inability to curtail the fallout from the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Hence, in the elections of 1932, Franklin D. Roosevelt, along with a heavily Democratic Congress, replaced Hoover, buoying the nation's hopes.

When Roosevelt became president in 1933, almost 25% of the workforce was unemployed. Thus, Roosevelt formulated The New Deal, a group of government programs and policies, aiming to help the American people. Majority of these policies were implemented during Roosevelt's first three months, and this time period became known as the 'Hundred Days'. The latter policies formed the Second New Deal of 1935.

My research question is **significant** as The New Deal was quintessential in changing the economic and social dynamic of America by transforming and introducing social and

economic regulations. It is **worthy of investigation** as these regulations continue to be present in modern day America, and this research also allows us to gain further insight into the multifaceted approaches that impact a leader's decisions, which is extremely relevant in the 21st century.

Historians such as William Leuchtenburg claim that Roosevelt had humanitarian motives for The New Deal, hoping to "use the authority of government as an organized form of self-help for all classes and groups and sections," (Roosevelt 8) highlighted by Roosevelt's character, his manner of dealing with opposition to the New Deal, and the social alignment of the policies. Conversely, it is argued that Roosevelt instead had political motivations. Revisionist historians like John T. Flynn, Ira Katznelson, and Hofstadter argue that Roosevelt used the New Deal to consolidate personal and party power, and intermingle with elites. Hence, to classify Roosevelt's intentions, the following question is explored:

To what extent was political expediency the key reason for Franklin Delano Roosevelt's formulation of The New Deal of 1933 - 39?

To gain a wider view of Roosevelt's motivations, this essay focuses on each motive and analyses its merits and discrepancies to come to a holistic, insightful conclusion.

2.0 Political Motivations

2.1 Maintain Support of Wealthy Businesses

It is argued that Roosevelt intermingled with large businesses and the country's corporate sector, aiming to please



the higher social strata to gain political support for the Democratic Party. Richard Hofstadter, an American historian even asserts that “FDR’s basic policies for industry and agriculture had been designed after models supplied by great vested-interest groups.” (Hofstadter 435) Here, Hofstadter is referring to two subsets of the New Deal: the Agricultural Adjustment Act (AAA) and the National Recovery Administration (NRA). The AAA, enacted in May 1933, improved the lives of farmers by artificially increasing their incomes, while the NRA, initiated in June 1933, was a business-government partnership to incentivize job creation and promote economic growth.

Hofstadter also argues that the NRA empowered the corporate sector in exchange for their support and political aid. This can be said as the NRA was speculatively based on the Swope Plan and proposals by the War Industries Board (WIB). These proposals were put forward by industrialists Gerald Swope, Bernard Baruch, General Hugh Johnson, as well as several others in an attempt to limit competition and benefit big companies as they promoted industrial self-regulation. Yet, despite the drawbacks of these proposals Roosevelt incorporated these ideas as a part of the NRA to garner support from the corporates. In fact, the NRA advocated the same ideas as the Swope Plan, for example the removal of ‘antitrust laws’ that cause monopolization. Further, even in the AAA, although posturing as an agency to protect all farmers, only provided subsidies based on a farmer’s acreage and output. Therefore, only rich farmers and landowners who already had wealth in terms of land benefitted. This has been argued by Historian Michael A. Bernstein who states FDR “sacrificed the interests of the marginal and the unrecognized to the welfare of those with

greater political and economic power.” (Powell xi)

Moreover with hindsight, it also becomes clear that FDR aimed to appease opposition from the industrialists who had formed the American Liberty League in 1934. The league was a non-partisan organization which was opposition to the New Deal and its interventionist nature. Hence, to discourage further opposition FDR adopted a more conservative New Deal policy to not anger the corporates. This can be seen via the formulation the Wagner Act, which was an act to allow workers to engage in collective bargaining, take part in strikes, and create labor unions. This strictly anti-corporate legislation was first introduced by Senator Robert Wagner of New York in 1934, but could have garnered backlash from the corporates. Hence, Arthur Schlesinger, an pro-FDR American Historian who lived through the New Deal possesses considerable primary information, suggests that Roosevelt “still hoping for the business cooperation which might make NRA a success, declined to back the measure.” (Schlesinger 150). Primary sources also aid Schlesinger’s argument as primary sources in the form of statements by Mrs. Perkins, the wife of Francis Perkins (the American Secretary of Labor), recalls that Roosevelt “never lifted a finger” (McKenna) to support the Wagner Act in Congress or in its formulation. This source and hence the argument can be trusted as Mrs. Perkins and her husband had close contact with FDR. However, Schlesinger wrote his book in 1956, and hence lacks access to new information about the New Deal and FDR, diluting the significance of his now to some extent outdated and relatively unsubstantiated arguments.

Moreover, FDR did not always support the corporates. In fact the Wagner



Act was enacted in 1935 as a part of the Second New Deal, and Roosevelt even called the corporates “economic royalists”(Roosevelt) in 1936 as a part of his presidential election campaign. However, linking back to the question even this highlights political motivations to the New Deal, as it highlights FDR’s opportunistic nature. This is as argued Roosevelt intermingled with businesses to expedite himself when was needed, yet betrayed them by changing his stance and New Deal policies when it benefited him. This is significant as FDR betrayed the corporates and altered the New Deal only upon seeing the NRA being declared unconstitutional in 1935, the upcoming presidential elections of 1936 and the fact the Wagner Act would be approved by the Senate despite his opposition. Thus, prioritized the Wagner Act and heralded it as act by him to help the workers to gain whatever political and electoral advantage he could, as he was losing support from the corporates.

2.2 Prevent opposition from Southern Traditionalist faction in the Democratic Party

Another reason that Roosevelt’s motivations for the New Deal may have been politically aligned is because he wanted to use the New Deal to maintain the ‘New Deal Coalition’, which was the political alignment of interest groups and voting blocs in the United States that supported the New Deal. Thus, Roosevelt aligned policies in a way to appease the traditionalist southern whites, known as the ‘Solid South,’ who constituted major support for the Democratic party. The Southern members harbored a racist attitude towards African-Americans, leading to an awkward partnership with Roosevelt’s progressive and humanitarian agenda.

Hence, to not garner opposition FDR intentionally stopped or discouraged the formulation and enactment of policies to help the African-American people. In fact, Historian Ira Katznelson, an American Historian, when referring to Roosevelt’s refusal to pass the anti-lynching legislation, asserts FDR decided to pursue a ‘southern strategy’. (Katznelson) In fact, in context of this event Roosevelt is quoted saying, “If I come out for the anti-lynching bill, they will block every bill,” (Goodwin 163) showing how political considerations did indeed affect the formulation of the New Deal.

Katznelson also having written her book in 2005, allowing for new information about the working of varied New Deal agencies, argues that Roosevelt also barred New Deal welfare policies from extending to the minority and African-American community. In fact, in the AAA the poorest farmers, especially those in South-America, bore the brunt, being disposed of their land and livelihood, while the Southern elite benefited. The Southern Tenant Farmers Union (STFU) leader, H.L. Mitchell, even stated that Roosevelt “talked like a cropper and acted like a planter.” (Schlesinger 379) Here, adding to the validity of the argument even the pro-Roosevelt historian Schlesinger agrees that Roosevelt did not help the poorest farmers, perhaps as it would be an “unmistakable affront to the conservative Southern leadership in Congress on which he relied for so much of his legislative program.” (Schlesinger 379)

These inherent discriminatory policies work to show that FDR clearly had political considerations in the formulation of the New Deal to ensure that he and the Democratic Party continue to be a dominant political force in America.



2.3 Improve Public Image and Enhance Reputation

Arguably, Roosevelt hoped the New Deal programs would enhance his own image amongst the public, and ensure his presidency. Hence, FDR may have aligned the policies to gain him electoral support and loyalty. This can be said as there is significant evidence highlighting how Roosevelt used the New Deal's welfare policies to 'buy votes' and further his political cause. Historian John T. Flynn, who is a famous contemporary journalist, and an avid criticizer of the New Deal since its inception, argues about Roosevelt that, "it was always easy to interest him in a plan which would confer some special benefit upon some special class in the population in exchange for their votes." (Flynn 65) This argument is widely supported, with many believing that with the presidential elections of 1936 around the corner, Roosevelt implemented policies that specifically provided relief to 'sway states;' those where he had relatively less support to increase his chances of a victory. In fact, the careful formulation of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), enacted in 1935 to hire unemployed workers, gave the federal government, and accordingly Roosevelt, the power to control billions of WPA dollars and its programs, and hence allowed for political coercion, interference, and corruption. Contemporary sources such as statements by Democrat Huey Long, who at the time of this statement planned to stand for President himself. He said, "why should Congress give Roosevelt a \$5 billion blank check with an election coming on?" (Schnell) Moreover, with the benefit of hindsight and access to greater information economic-historians like Gavin Wright have been able to conduct detailed econometric analysis of the relief agencies and conclude that the

primary goal in distributing New Deal unemployment funds was political. This analysis is largely based on facts and adds to the validity of the argument. (Wright)

Additionally, Roosevelt also used the programs to carry out political propaganda to emphasize his achievements, thereby maintaining and gaining support. In fact, Roosevelt used the Federal Theater Project (FTP) as a part of the WPA to create "plays about the social conditions in the country – and again, spotlight New Deal progress." (Shlaes)

2.4 Political Opportunism, Elections and The New Deal

Mostly, it is argued Roosevelt was inherently a political opportunist who did not have a set motivation and aim for the New Deal, but rather only created politically aligned policies to exploit the prevailing social climate to benefit his party and himself. In fact John T. Flynn asserts that "the positions he took on political and economic questions were not taken in accordance with deeply rooted political beliefs but under the influence of political necessity. He was in every sense purely an opportunist." (Flynn 78). This statement was made in context of 1932 presidential elections, wherein FDR had promised to reduce the fiscal deficit, only to indulge in immense spending during his years as president to appease the public.

FDR's opportunism is also conveyed by visualizing his intermingling with his opposition. Francis Townsend, who opposed Roosevelt, through his Townsend Plan of 1934 called for a monthly pension for the elderly and hence gained massive support. It received around some 10 million endorsements and several members of Congress were elected on the Townsend platform, such as the California poet laureate



John McGroarty. In fact, a contemporary news source, Harper's Monthly, said that "On Capitol Hill in Washington the politicians are amazed and terrified by it." (Hiltzik 232) Therefore, seeing the changing political climate Roosevelt formulated and enacted the Social Security Act in 1935, which is renowned for establishing old-age pensions and unemployment benefits. Yet, it is an evident product of the political-opportunism, as it was in attempt to quell opposition from the Townsend Plan.

Hence, this also presents the idea that elections were a major cause behind the political alignment of the New Deal, as the Social Security Act was implemented immediately prior to the elections of 1936. Similarly majority of New Deal policies are concentrated in periods immediately preceding some form of national election. The Second New Deal of 1935, which brought about a flurry of social reforms such as the Wagner Act, were enacted immediately prior to the 1936 national elections. In fact, speculatively FDR was fearful that the opposers may dilute FDR's chances of winning the elections and hence used the New Deal to expedite himself politically. In fact in 1935 Roosevelt faced opposition from Louisiana Senator, Huey Long, as Long wanted to implement exorbitant taxes on the rich, and gained a massive following in the process. Yet, he was ultimately sidelined by Roosevelt when the Wealth Tax Act of 1935 was launched. The Act was essentially a repackaging of Long's plan. He even himself said that this was done to "Steal Long's thunder." (A. M. Schlesinger 326) Linking back, even the implementation of the Wagner Act highlights how policies were politically aligned and formulated to help FDR in the elections.

3.0 Humanitarian Motivations:

On the other hand, primary sources and historians such William Leuchtenburg argue that Roosevelt harbored humanitarian aims for the New Deal: chiefly aiming to better the lives of the common people. This is made evident by Roosevelt's character, massive relief and welfare programs, and the New Deal legislation he enacted to permanently change the social standard in America.

3.1 Roosevelt's Character

Firstly, it can be argued that inherently Roosevelt was a humanitarian with a genuine intention to help the common man, and later this humanitarianism served to be a motivation for the New Deal. This can be exemplified via looking at his actions before presidency. For example, during his early political career as Governor of New York, in light of the Wall Street Crash and brewing depression, he supported lower taxes for farmers by getting the New York state legislature to pass the Temporary Emergency Relief Administration (TERA) and the provision of unemployment relief, which in turn relieved and provided employment to the needy. Furthermore, his humanitarian nature and support for his people is shown through his speeches and statements. In his famous campaign speech in April of 1932, The Forgotten Man, he claimed that "these unhappy times call for the building of plans that rest upon the forgotten... build from the bottom up and not from the top down, that put their faith once more in the forgotten man at the bottom of the economic pyramid." (Roosevelt) This established Roosevelt's credentials as a liberal reformer who wants to help the lower classes and showcased the imbibed humanitarianism in Roosevelt. Yet, it can be argued that such speeches were only meant to garner support from the public and



not representative of any humanitarian values.

3.2 New Deal Policies:

Furthermore, Roosevelt's New Deal policies themselves show their social and humanitarian alignment as they catered to the needs of people and helped ease persisting problems. This can be seen via his campaigns and policies in the First Hundred Days. Through his relief and employment campaigns he directly employed people, and from 1933 to 1935, Roosevelt reduced unemployment by 6% and rekindled confidence. Yet, despite having curbed the worst effects of the depression, he also brought out policies such as the Wagner Act, Social Security Act and the Fair Labor Standards Act, suggesting his commitment to helping people and not only progress politically. On the other hand, it can be argued that he was reluctant to support these reforms and was actually forced to implement them. For example, the Wagner Act and the Social Security Act could have only been enacted to dissuade opposition or because Roosevelt was unable to stop them.

Yet by the end, as asserted by Hofstadter, Roosevelt was seen as (Hofstadter 391) This image is visualized in the formulation of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), which was initiated in May 1933 to provide direct relief in the form of cash payments to the poor and unemployed. As the head of FERA, Harry L. Hopkins, puts forward the following statement that suggests Roosevelt at times chose humanitarianism above political motivations. He claims that Roosevelt, after appointing Hopkins, called Hopkins to his office and said, "give immediate and adequate relief to the unemployed, and pay no attention to politics or politicians."

(Hopkins 162) As can be seen, Roosevelt's intentions with the FERA seem pure and devoid of personal or political motives. Yet, it can be argued statements which in this case were based on memory may not always be true. Thus, with the benefit of hindsight and a more reliable econometric analysis, the fact that the FERA was used to 'buy votes' dilutes this argument and again suggests political motivations were key in the New Deal. Hence, often contemporary sources and Roosevelt's image is construed due to the propaganda and false statements.

3.3 New Deal and Minority Groups:

Additionally, Roosevelt's motives for the New Deal are seen to be humanitarian, as he in contrast to previous governments, tried to enhance the life of minority groups who did not represent a large electoral majority. This is conveyed as through the New Deal Roosevelt helped farmers, who had suffered due to overproduction and competition from abroad in the 1920s. He did so by increasing their incomes through the AAA. Moreover, relief was granted without discrimination. A renowned labor historian Irving Bernstein, even asserts "Blacks, especially in the South, who had never before gotten anything from government, suddenly found themselves eligible for federal relief." (Bernstein) This argument is also aided by the fact that it is made by a historian specializing in labor and workers, and hence is a unbiased argument and is from the perspective of the common worker. In conjunction, The FERA also attempted to provide women with equal work opportunities by ordering states to appoint women to head a division in each state agency. As can be seen, his policies were humanitarily motivated and played a great role helping those without a voice. Lastly, this also draws away from the argument that FDR only supported groups with greater



power, such as the southern democrats and the corporates, as the minority groups had a very small electoral impact.

However, his humanitarian motives are diluted by the fact that some policies were intentionally barred from include scope for minority groups such as African-Americans. In fact, the Civilian Conservation Corporation, initiated in April 1933, and the WPA, which both aimed to reduce unemployment, and in Roosevelt's words, to "preserve not only the bodies of the unemployed from destruction, but also their self-respect, their self-confidence, courage, and determination," (Schnell) imposed quotas on African-American workers and segregated worker camps on a racial basis. This was arguably done to not oppose the southern supporters of the New Deal, and ensure that the New Deal coalition remained strong, again highlighting a political agenda to the New Deal.

3.4 Opposition and the New Deal:

Roosevelt also had humanitarian motives as he opposed all those who held conservative and corrupt motives for the New Deal. This is made evident through the fact that to preserve the humanitarian nature of the New Deal, he opposed both his own party and the supreme court, leading to political backlash. This is firstly seen through the opposition which came from the Supreme Court, who declared the AAA, NRA, among other New Deal agencies, unconstitutional. They argued the policies to be too interventionist and claimed relief should be handled by state governments. But, in 1937, Roosevelt opposed the court, and attempted to rid opposing judges through a 'court packing' scheme, wherein he would appoint sympathetic judges to the court. Although this failed and garnered him political

backlash with historian William Leuchtenburg, a leading scholar of the life and career of FDR, arguing it was the worst reaction from Congress that Roosevelt suffered in his 12 years of presidency, it showed his willingness to fight those who did not allow the New Deal to be humanitarian.

Further, William Leuchtenburg with his vast amount of knowledge about the New Deal argues that Roosevelt was not a "representative of a single class but as the conductor of a concert of interests. A man above the political battle, the President aimed to serve as the unifier of interests." (Leuchtenberg 84) In fact, he went against even his own conservative party elements in 1938 the party lacked ideological consistency. In Roosevelt's words "An election cannot give a country a firm sense of direction if it has two or more national parties which merely have different names but are as alike in their principles and aims as peas in the same pod." (Roosevelt, "Fireside Chat") Hence, in the mid-1938s, he travelled across the country to defend his progressive policies and lash out at those who argued against it such as Democratic Senators: Walter George of Georgia and Millard Tydings of Maryland. However, historians challenge this claim by asserting that he was attempting to gain political mileage. This can be said as the purge was preceding the midterm elections of 1938 and hence could have been an attempt to gain support from the public and power in the congress.

4.0 Economic Motivations:

Additionally, another of Roosevelt's motivations was to improve the economy. Infact, often economic motivations took precedence over both humanitarian and political considerations. For example, to balance the growing fiscal deficit, Roosevelt



substantially cut down government spending, despite knowing it would adversely affect the people and garner political uproar. This led to the recession of 1937, where unemployment rates jumped from 14.3% to 19.0%, and output fell by 37% from 1934. However, the economic and humanitarian aspect of the New Deal could be aligned to work together. Roosevelt believed in Keynesian Economics, claiming government spending, welfare spending and investing, all help economies improve and cause living standards to increase, interlinking the two motives.

5.0 Conclusion:

To conclude, Roosevelt majorly used the New Deal policies to garner political mileage. Although aspects of the New Deal show humanitarian motives, he was often obligated rather than motivated to include these as it was not possible to maintain power without appeasing the people. This is seen through Roosevelt using humanitarian policies to gain support prior to elections, making them a product of necessity rather than of his own ideology and beliefs.

Further, the fact that unemployment was over 17% in 1939 and weak economic growth suggests the New Deal policies were not implemented well and did not truly solve the people's problems, showcasing it was used more to indulge in political expediency. Moreover, even Roosevelt's support for groups such as the south and the corporates, rather than the common people and minorities, showcase that it was more politically aligned. Hence, it can be concluded that in the formulation of New Deal, politics dominated.

Lastly, while writing this essay, I faced the difficulty of having to ensure the sources I used were free from bias and additionally, ensuring that I evaluated each

source. Furthermore, each argument had several nuances. For example, while on the surface level, the motives seemed humanitarian, they were subtly underlined by political intentions and I had to analyze this as well to ensure that my research was insightful.

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