

New Deal Coalition

From the second part of the 19th century Southern whites traditionally belonged to the Democratic Party. Franklin Delano Roosevelt realized that in order to win an election and then to achieve at least a fraction of his ambitious plan he needed a wider support base. He, his think tanks and campaign teams managed to reach portions of the population that were previously not aligned with him, or often did not even practice their electoral power. The people with an unusually wide range of political interest formed the New Deal coalition that manifested itself with the electoral victories at least till the 1960s.

I am primarily referring to women and African Americans. Technically women got the right to vote on the national level in 1920, but in reality they were not accustomed en mass to practice this right. With the help and prompt of the First Lady a growing number of women got administrative position in the government. Economically and politically the sexes are still not equal today but this was the era when the process towards balance started. Eleanor Roosevelt also worked hard with against racial discrimination. Along with the help of Mary McLeod Bethune, other African American leaders and the president himself the number of African Americans in government positions tripled. These beginning changes in the top were supported by the aforementioned segments of society voting in larger numbers for Democrats.

Constituencies from other minorities, such as Asian Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans also saw minor improvements in their situation thus were more inclined towards the coalition than the opposing major political party. People further left, such as members of the Communist and Socialist Parties also voted for FDR at the 1932 elections and the following years. The former of the two decided to build a “Popular Front” and were more successful than ever. Later they implicitly supported FDR, even if they couldn’t do it explicitly, fearing of alienating his more moderate supporters.

The Racialization of Japanese

In the US and particularly in California there was a series of legislation aimed at limiting the number of people of Asian origins coming to the country or if they were already here, limiting their rights. Just looking at the 20th century we can see that a 1908 presidential executive order ended immigration from Hawaii to the mainland, the California's Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited sale of lands to "aliens ineligible for citizenship" (including Japanese immigrants who were not allowed to naturalize), the 1917 Immigration Act established an "Asiatic Barred Zone", and without going into further details: 1924 Reed Johnson Immigration Act, 1934's Tydings-McDuffe Act and as a culmination the 1942 presidential Executive Order 9066 that made it possible the internment of Japanese Americans.

But these were just the legal aspects. There is also a grassroots movement fueled by the fear of Asians taking over jobs and economic opportunities. In this spirit the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League was established in 1905 and three years later it changed its name to Asian Exclusion League to include Punjabi Sikhs in its target.

Racialization was also propagated by the media, particularly the government directed propaganda. It dehumanized "them", depicting them as a race unable to appreciate the value of human life the same way as "we" do. Using the language of exclusion this successfully conjured the image of a speared us and them. An extreme example of this was the article that was supposed to help (white) readers to differentiate Chinese and Japanese. The twisted irony was that at that point the Chinese were considered the good Asians, and the Japanese the bad ones, while just a few years earlier it was the other way around.

Some argue that these racialized devalued view of Japanese Americans might have contributed to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after all it is less of a crime to kill a dehumanized enemy. I find the counterarguments stronger though. The ideas that it helped to win unconditional surrender from Japan, to end the war as quickly as possible with a minimum loss of American life, to defeat Japan without significant help from the Russians, and to prove them that we have the military might to rule the world all seem more significant than the racialized stereotyp.

Liberalism's Change

Classical liberalism of the 19th century meant an absence of restraint the ability to do as one pleased. This kind of liberalism was against big government, seeing that as a threat to freedom.

Modern liberalism however learned its lesson from the Great Depression and recognized that real freedom required active protectionist of an interventionist government. This is best exemplified in FDR's 1941 speech adding to the list of liberal values of freedom and speech the newer concepts of freedom from want and fear.

FDR's administration and New Deal program acted in four different ways along these values. They provided direct aid to the people, acknowledged and empowered previously disenfranchised segments of society, expanded and reorganized the executive branch of the government, and transformed the party system.

After FDR's death, during the second Red Scare, metaphorically and often literally speaking, liberalism went to hiding. It reemerged only in the 1960's with LB Johnson's presidency as a strong political voice. However the fear of communism became its major characteristic. As such it focused its energies on the struggle against international communism. Constant economic growth allowed liberals to embrace Keynesian economics. Its main tenet was that government could use fiscal policy to stimulate the economy. Thus postwar liberals cooperated with business to ensure economic growth. Another important change in liberalism was that they started to view democracy as a process of bargaining among groups. This pluralist political view was based on the assumption individuals acted on vague irrational principles and emotions. Instead of them, groups had the kind of necessary expertise needed to make informed decision that allowed them to focus on problem solving.

While postwar Democrats and Republicans both cut themselves generous pieces of the expanded pie, postwar liberals stepped up the battle for racial justice. At the same time LBJ was interested in effectiveness, in the area of winning elections, passing bills, implementing policy. For him these were the purposes of liberalism: to deliver concrete things to people. His 1955 "Program with a Heart" called for expanded Social Security coverage, subsidies for farmers, tax breaks for the poor, water conservation, repeal of the poll tax, more hospitals, schools, roads, and housing.

Five events that changed everything

Women vote – The 19th Amendment in 1920 was ratified. From this point on finally the "other half" of the population started to get equal footing and participation in US society. The equalizing process is not over yet, see women's wages compared to men's but this was a major step.

Great Depression – This phase of the economic cycle was long and deep and it affected a huge proportion of the society. Long: hope left people that they would ever get out of it. Deep: starvation, massive poverty, unemployment. Lot of people: practically every family was effected one way or another, divorce rates went up, childbirth rate down, violence increased.

New Deal - The start of the welfare state, that is crumbling now, but still exists. The roads, building, structures, electricity program started then is still around us and we are enjoying its benefits.

World War II - It helped to et the US out of the Great Depression, launched the era/culture of abundance, but also cost a lot of American lives. From this point on the unimaginable (Holocaust) was imaginable.

Vietnam War – It harmed not just the Vietnamese, but the American society both physically and psychologically. Physically regarding the number of death and wounded, not to mention the financial cost. Psychologically: this was a lost war with not a clear beginning or end; not widely supported, and the returning veterans' PTS was considerable.