

Introduction

Devoted to the Common Good?

President Barack Obama inherited an economic crisis as severe as any we have known since the Great Depression, and many have likened his task to Franklin D. Roosevelt's. Indeed, the appeal to the 1930s and FDR's heroic rescue of the nation has been invoked many times as a model for the challenge Obama faces. From the West Wing "brain trust" of the Obama administration to the investment in public employment, there are many parallels to the Depression experience. Yet the present crisis takes place against a backdrop of rampant inequality and a legacy of political polarization that make any social compact of the kind expressed in the New Deal harder to jump-start.

Social critics often remark on the declining commitment to the common good in our era. The wealthy, who have benefited disproportionately from the economic growth of the last forty years, have pulled so far away from the middle—not to mention the bottom—that they no longer consider themselves bound by the social contract. During the long period of conservative dominance, the commitments of citizens toward one another eroded in the face of the more resonant message of individual accountability and self-advantage. Confidence in the efficacy of government all but disappeared.

From this vantage point, commentators tell us, the past appears more appealing. The New Deal and the Great Society stand out as periods when we made good on the idea that citizens should be sworn to the common good and the protection of the needy. As Michael Tomasky put the matter in *The American Prospect*,

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For many years—during their years of dominance and success, the period of the New Deal up through the first part of the Great Society—the Democrats practiced a brand of liberalism quite different from today’s. Yes, it certainly sought to expand both rights and prosperity. But it did something more: The liberalism was built around the idea—the philosophical principle—that citizens should be called upon to look beyond their own self-interest and work for a great common interest.¹

The New Deal, Tomasky tells us, “engaged and ennobled people.” It gave us Social Security, rural electrification, federal mortgage insurance, and public works ranging from a federal highway system to thousands of new schools. That same expansive and inclusive spirit later animated American generosity on an international scale through the Marshall Plan. John F. Kennedy asked “for sacrifice for the common good.” Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society sprang from the same civic republican roots. Tomasky urges us to reconnect with this great tradition to reinvigorate the country, an admonition addressed especially to the Democratic Party.

But is it correct to think of the New Deal era as a time when the public determined that we owe one another a lot? Or was it a case of policy triumphing over public sentiment and of social policies that were more generous than popular? Our analysis, presented at length in chapter one, is that Roosevelt encountered a great deal of resistance toward many aspects of the New Deal. Much of the backlash developed as the fiscal bite of the New Deal became clearer and, ironically, as some of its boldest programs reduced unemployment, leading some to question the need to continue government spending on such a large scale. But even at the outset, before we had the opinion polls of the kind that reveal the public’s reservations, letters to the president and the first lady make it clear that the American people were divided about the promise of the New Deal. Far from being sympathetic to the poor, much popular opinion held that the unemployed were the authors of their own misfortune, that recipients of government benefits were cheaters and loafers who would have little trouble finding work if they really wanted it. Attempts to rescue them

through federal programs were creating helpless, dependent masses that would never stand on their own two feet. While many, perhaps even the majority, were desperate for FDR's intervention, others, often in elite and powerful circles, were adamantly opposed on ideological and moral grounds. FDR prevailed over these critics, but the struggle forced him to compromise in ways that excited even more criticism and denied benefits to millions of Americans, who had to wait decades before their legitimate claims were recognized.

And what of Johnson's Great Society: did the initial support for government investment in employment and training, nutrition, housing, and health care for the poor last? Or did Johnson sustain mandates despite growing public opposition? In chapter two we argue that as long as programs for the needy were understood to benefit the deserving poor—widows and their children—their public image was mildly positive.² But the moment those worthies were removed and public programs were directed toward the able-bodied—never-married mothers, abandoned wives, and above all minorities—public support evaporated, and hostility toward the undeserving festered.³ To some degree it was always there. Yet in a period of growing affluence, neither the cost of the programs nor the ways in which they stretched public patience for a “brother's keeper” role for government were particularly visible. Johnson faced more indifference than opposition, at least in the beginning. But a groundswell of public frustration eventually reached his White House as well, inspired by a belief in the centrality of the work ethic and the corollary that those who stand outside the labor market deserve their poverty.

That negative impulse was strengthened by the urban riots of the 1960s and the rise of the black power movement, which raised the visibility of African American grievances against a society riddled with discrimination and inequality, and coincided with—perhaps fueled—a backlash against much of what the Great Society stood for. Nonetheless, Johnson persevered, and as a result, today we have Medicaid and Medicare, Head Start, food stamps, and a variety of other manifestations of his social activism. That legislative record inspires today's progressives to regard the 1960s as a period of civic renewal, and rightly so. But the War on Poverty was not spurred by

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public opinion; it was forged by a leader willing to move out ahead of his constituents. When the opposition grew, LBJ was willing to swim against the stream. One could say the same—and we do—about Richard Nixon, hardly a hero of the Left. Yet Nixon's domestic policy contained surprisingly progressive elements that were almost entirely rejected by the public at large and left a legacy from which those at the bottom have actually benefited more than we often credit.

Is this divide between leaders and their constituents evident only in periods we remember as progressive? Fast-forward to the 1980s and '90s and the triumph of the conservative revolution, and we meet the disjunction once again. Presidents Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush were bent on reversing the legacy of the New Deal, rolling back government efforts at social engineering wherever possible.

Given the sustained period of conservative activism, we might imagine enthusiastic and growing public support for a limited conception of government intervention on behalf of the weakest members of society. Our analysis in chapter three suggests otherwise, for the conservative electoral victories took place against a backdrop of rising inequality, runaway CEO salaries, and, beginning in the early 1980s, a tidal wave of outsourcing and downsizing that shook the middle class badly.⁴ Blue-collar workers felt the brunt of deindustrialization first, but by the early 1980s it was the white-collar managers who began to see their prospects wash away.

Popular sentiment was ambivalent about some of the most fervent convictions of conservative politicians. Their victories at the ballot box diverted attention from the quiet *increase* in public support for policies that dampened inequality and protected the less fortunate. The economic meltdown that gathered force in late 2008 exacerbated growing vulnerabilities among educated, experienced workers. We argue that instability among working families, including those that are relatively well off, is now so great and the prospects for the next generation are so uncertain that a kind of tolerance for, if not an embrace of, government support for the poor has replaced the harder-hearted temperament of the 1930s and 1960s. Indeed, Barack Obama's election is explained, at least in part, by the desire for greater

protection from the unchecked power of the market as championed by many conservatives.

In this book, we argue that in these three periods of our history, political leaders often moved boldly into a policy vacuum or forged on against growing antagonism. They pushed and pulled legislators into creating and then sustaining the progressive history of the 1930s and 1960s we now—mistakenly—see as a sea change in popular political culture. Indeed, one of the reasons why presidential speeches given by Roosevelt and Johnson stand as among the most powerful and moving in American history is because they were trying to *catalyze* or *re-capture* popular sentiment in the “brother’s keeper” direction when it was in danger of listing the opposite way. Similarly, from the 1980s to the election of Barack Obama, the rhetorical rejection of “Washington,” the identification of government as the source of our economic problems rather than as part of the solution, was sustained even as the public moved—modestly, to be sure—in the other direction.

To illustrate the disconnect between the brother’s keeper sentiments we remember and the reality of limits to public endorsement of government activism on behalf of the less fortunate, we turn to opinion polls and letters to leaders for each of the three key periods: the New Deal Era of the 1930s and the early 1940s, the Great Society and Johnson’s War on Poverty, and the “second gilded age” of the 1980s and 1990s, when income inequality grew rapidly and an ascendant conservative movement unraveled many of the programs and policies born and nurtured in the previous two eras.

In the 1930s, a series of surveys was undertaken by magazines like *Forbes* and *Fortune* to gauge public views of the Depression and to assess the public’s reactions to the New Deal. The first public opinion firms, led by Roper and Gallup, joined in this effort to measure public sympathy (or antipathy) toward FDR’s plans. These polls were well known to the Roosevelt administration and, as we note in chapter one, were critical to the president’s understanding of just how far, how radically, he could push the federal government to respond to the economic crisis. But they have been little analyzed by scholars, despite the wealth of information they contain on the public’s view of relief programs, Social Security, medical care, and the like,

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because they were not gathered according to modern standards of sampling.⁵

Thanks to methodological interventions developed by MIT political scientist Adam Berinsky, we are able to correct for their defects now and hence can mine many of these polls to understand more accurately what ordinary Americans thought about the causes of poverty and unemployment, what they believed the government should or should not do about the maelstrom of the Depression, and whether or not the particular circumstances of their own lives or the condition of their communities mattered in shaping their views.⁶ Were communities that were particularly hard hit by shuttered factories and grim breadlines more sympathetic to the developing welfare state? Or did they turn a hard face to the needy, believing that federal benefits would coddle the poor and turn them into lifelong dependents, unable to fend for themselves? What about those who were on relief themselves? How different were their views from those of their more fortunate neighbors or the readers of *Fortune* magazine? The 400-plus opinion polls of the New Deal era give us some purchase on the answers.

But numbers tell only part of the story. For more textured insight, we turn to the voluminous correspondence that men and women all over the country sent to FDR, Eleanor Roosevelt, and the agencies that ministered to the poor and the unemployed. In the dark days of the thirties, people who had virtually nothing to their names—the millions of Joads drifting away from failing farms, the desperate blue-collar men shuffling around outside the shuttered factories—were eager to let their leaders know what they thought. The Roosevelt archives in Hyde Park contain thousands of letters imploring the president and the First Lady to preserve or jettison the core programs of the New Deal.⁷ We do not pretend to offer a random sample of these letters. We do make every effort to represent the variety of views locked away in the presidential archives and the letters written to Boake Carter, a Philadelphia radio announcer whose original claim to fame was his coverage of the Lindberg baby kidnapping but who devoted much of his broadcasting career to denouncing the New Deal.⁸

We take a similar approach to the 1960s, the second expansive period of government efforts to eradicate poverty. The opinion polls we analyze, coupled with letters contained in the Johnson and Nixon archives, continue a conversation about who is deserving that began thirty years earlier, in the depths of the Depression, and continued at high decibels as the Great Society developed and the debate over Nixon's ideas for the negative income tax became part of the policy lexicon.

Finally, we turn to the General Social Survey and the National Election Studies for the 1980s and 1990s to understand how the people have diverged from their elected leaders in the context of galloping inequality, increasingly unstable employment for the middle class (as well as those below), and dimming prospects for intergenerational mobility.

To be sure, public opinion is not the only source of pressure on presidential leadership. Elites with special access, organized interest groups, social movements that gathered the allegiance of the down-trodden, marches on Washington — all of these other ways of expressing the public mindset surely played an important role in shaping policymakers' ultimate decisions. In this book, we focus attention on what opinion polls and letters to political leaders can tell us about the limits and contours of American attitudes toward government intervention on behalf of the poor. All of the presidents we consider here tracked the findings of opinion surveys, even in FDR's era, when the practice of polling was in its infancy. It is beyond our mission — though a worthy question — to determine how leaders weighed the force of public opinion as measured in polls against the more dramatic and visible evidence of popular movements and marches.

What we hope to do instead is focus on what the surveys tell us about mass attitudes.⁹ In all three periods, the public exhibited far more mixed and contentious attitudes about activist government than the politicians they returned to office. This does not mean the leaders were totally indifferent to the popular will. On the contrary, the advisers in Roosevelt's Brain Trust tempered their ambitious rescue plans because they understood that the public rejected many of their ideas. Roosevelt himself was no fan of the dole. He had doubts

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about boosting federal spending in the form supported by adherents of Keynesian economics, and his decision to slam on the brakes in 1937 in order to balance the budget provoked a brutal increase in unemployment. Administrator Harry Hopkins, head of various emergency relief programs and ultimately secretary of commerce, always believed in public employment as the answer to desperation, but he had to defend it in the face of mounting deficits that might have been partially ameliorated by a less expensive but wildly unpopular cash relief. Americans were more enthusiastic about federal employment programs than about the dole, but, as we show in chapter one, opposition to most forms of government help for the indigent was surprisingly strong, even in the states hardest hit by the calamity of the Depression.

Lyndon Johnson was as committed as Bobby Kennedy to the eradication of poverty. But while Kennedy appealed to the shame of Appalachian shacks in the richest nation on earth, Johnson spoke about the role of government in addressing educational preparation for the poor, to enable them to find a place in the working world. Work was the mantra, and in invoking it, LBJ was speaking to the popular belief in the sanctity of employment as an indirect means of addressing the poverty problem. Even so, as our analysis in chapter two shows, while Johnson benefited from a level of public indifference at the beginning of his term (into which he could insert the Great Society), he encountered growing opposition as time wore on. The achievements for which we remember the Great Society, particularly Medicare and Medicaid, not only failed to catalyze a groundswell of support, they faced declining public support over time.

Unlike Harry Hopkins, who followed up a similar commitment to the eradication of the deep poverty of the Depression with public jobs, Johnson did almost nothing to create employment, instead wrapping the Great Society around the objective of increasing educational opportunity and removing racial barriers to fair competition. These were worthy objectives, to be sure, but they were defined by a goal of fair play in education and labor markets, not by the creation of a universal social welfare system.¹⁰ And even these less radical ob-

jectives were a hard sell in a country that was often ambivalent about the goals of the Great Society.

Where Richard Nixon advocated the negative income tax, which *was* a redistributive plan, Ronald Reagan's fondest wish was to strip government to its barest bones and foster Darwinian self-reliance as the answer to poverty. George W. Bush took this spirit further, enacting massive tax cuts for the rich and running up staggering deficits in line with what Reagan's budget director David Stockman argued would "starve the beast" and force an end to social programs of all kinds, including those for the poor. Though the public returned Bush to office, the opinion polls we examine in chapter three make it clear they did not swallow his vision whole. Conservative electoral triumphs of recent decades did not *respond* to public outcry to reverse direction; instead, they tried to *create* an ardor for dismantling government. To the extent that the proof lies in the ballot box, they succeeded—at least temporarily. But when we look for deep tracks in public opinion, the evidence is either meager or nonexistent that welfare state retrenchment and unfettered individualism were consonant with American attitudes.

In short, in the 1930s and 1960s, government officials created programs that encountered resistance in the court of public opinion and persevered in laying a foundation for the American welfare state that, although weak when compared with the social democracies of Europe, became an essential source of protection against the vagaries of the market. Leaders were politically courageous in the face of public sentiment that could have completely derailed the development or the persistence of the safety net.

In the 1980s and 1990s, conservatives were again bucking a tide, but one that was much harder to discern because the transformations wrought by globalization, declining union density, and skill-biased technological change produced a jarring set of realities whose causes and consequences are hotly debated even today. What the public registered in the polls, as we present in the third chapter, was a growing discontent with the runaway rich and a desire to sustain rather than dismantle the protections built during the New Deal and reinforced

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by the Great Society. This may be the best explanation for the election outcome of 2008, in which the conservative revolution seems to have come a cropper. If so, it will follow in the footsteps of other periods of extreme inequality, such as the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century, in which political economies run amok ultimately provoked the election of progressive leaders promising change.

The essence of leadership is not registering the popular will and transforming it into policy but setting a course and sticking to one's guns in the face of growing resistance. This, we argue, is the real story of the New Deal, the Great Society, and the conservative triumph in the age of inequality.